

An Imaginative Journey Through The Mass

By Rev. Joseph Dorner

Several weeks ago, I mentioned to my parishioners a willingness to give a homiletic series on a topic of interest, consisting of three or four homilies, and asked for suggestions. Overwhelmingly, parishioners encouraged me to focus the series upon the Mass. It was well received. Some encouraged me to link it to our parish website and Facebook. Below is the homily, rewritten in consideration of the different format:

I was pleasantly surprised when I received a number of requests to speak about the Mass. It reminded me of the disciples' request of Jesus, "Teach us how to pray." That request inspired Jesus to compose the Lord's Prayer. In a way, I feel you are saying, "Teach us how to pray." But how does one approach the Mass, the greatest of our sacraments, our central Christian prayer? It is a little overwhelming. The Mass has so many parts, details and so much history. But then it dawned on me. There is a secret to better appreciating the Mass. All you need is a good imagination! How many here have a good imagination? Okay, well, this may take a little work. Let's give it a try!

Imagine it is fifteen minutes to the start of Mass. You enter the church. All of a sudden, something looks and feels different. First you notice you are now clothed in white, in a garment with no mark or wrinkle, like the Angels and Saints as revealed in the Book of Revelations. And you notice not only you, the presider and ministers are vested in white, but the entire congregation. As you enter, the main body of the church is filled with light and appears to be a long hall. There are no pews. In the distance you can make out what seems to be a sanctuary. You hear the Opening Hymn. The procession begins. You fall in behind the cross bearer. As you approach what you think is the sanctuary, more and more people join you, from parishes throughout the world. Finally, you arrive. But it isn't a sanctuary. It is a gathering space before the very gates of heaven. The gates are slightly open. A bishop leads us in prayer saying, "We gather here in God's name: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Then after the greeting you experience a sensation of fear, not fear as in terror, but fear that something wonderful is about to be experienced and seen, something that could be overwhelming, too much to withstand. The gates of heaven are slightly open and you glimpse the face of God. Ours is the experience of Moses as he stood before the burning bush. There is a fear that we will die if we see God, the wonder and awe being too much. It is similar to the experience of the prophet Isaiah as recorded in chapter six of what some call the fifth Gospel:

“I saw the Lord, sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face [so as not to gaze directly upon the Lord.] And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.’ And I said: ‘Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!’

“Then one of the seraphim flew toward me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: ‘Behold, your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven.’”

All this we experience during the Penitential Rite. When we hear the words, “To prepare ourselves for these sacred mysteries, let us recall our sins and ask God to grant us pardon and peace,” our hearts are filled with a sense of unworthiness to be at the gates of heaven, Fear of the Lord. When we hear the words, “May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins and bring us to every lasting life,” we are at peace. It is as if the Angel touched our lips with the burning coal, purified us, and suddenly we find ourselves in heaven with the white robed angels and saints singing the Gloria. Having been washed in the blood of the Lamb, we are now capable and worthy of worshiping and praising God. The Gloria makes clear we are now in heaven, having passed through the heavenly gates. In fact, at any point during the Mass we should be able to hear very softly, in our imagination, the Gloria or the Sanctus, long after the choir and we have stopped singing it on any particular Sunday, as the angels are constantly praising and worshiping God in these words.

What happens next? We actually see the face of God. As we enter the Liturgy of the Word we see him through what we hear, his Word, or Sacred Scripture. I like to imagine a great ambo surrounded by the vast crowd of worshipers. It is the first great station we visit in our journey through the Mass, our visit to heaven. It may take several years of Masses to experience the entire three year cycle of the Liturgy of the Word, but each Liturgy of the Word is a true vision of God. The Gospels provide the most vivid experience so we, as a sign of reverence, stand for this final proclamation.

After the Gospel we continue with our vision through the Homily typically given by the presider. It is an in depth development of one or two insights from the sacred text. It is designed to help us experience or see the face of God more clearly. It should be noted this is why we are encouraged to study the texts before our celebration. The presider cannot bring out all the implications and insights these rich texts provide. In a sense, each of us is responsible for the quality of our vision and should at a minimum read the texts before beginning our weekly spiritual journey.

After the Homily we move into the Creed. I like to see it as a joyous proclamation of our renewed faith. Having seen the face of God, we with great faith and joy pray this

summary of all Sacred Scripture and Tradition. Perhaps it should be sung. It is an amen not just to the faith we heard proclaimed on that particular Sunday, but an amen to the entire faith. Naturally, we stand.

Finally, we conclude the Liturgy of the Word with the Intercessions. Having seen God and through him, the world and our race as he would have it, we realize how far we are from the Kingdom. Using our imagination we can see ourselves looking down from heaven upon our world. We see the brokenness that calls our hearts and minds into prayer and are moved to exercise our priestly role. As we hear the Intercessions, images of the needs of our world flood our minds and move us to quiet prayer. All this we can include when we respond to the individual petitions with, "Lord, hear our prayer." This marks the end of the first great station we visit in heaven.

We now move toward the second great station of heaven, the altar of sacrifice, or Mount Calvary. Our imaginative journey takes us into the Liturgy of the Eucharist. It begins with the Collection. Then we see the bread, the wine and offering brought to the priest and deacon by the gift bearers. Using our imaginations, we see not just the gift bearers but the entire congregation presenting to the priest these gifts to be offered on the altar, but not these gifts alone. During the Collection we were thinking of the other sacrifices and offerings we could present. So we see all the spiritual or interior offerings: our service on behalf of family, our labors in the workplace, our community outreach, our sacrifices made on behalf of neighbor, even setbacks, disappointments, physical ailments, and other personal crosses. All these we visualize being presented to the priest and then placed on the altar before God the Father. We remember the words of St. Paul, "We fill up the sufferings, still lacking in the sufferings of Christ." We experience the good news in that not only do the joyous times have value but even the difficult.

So our priest arrives at the altar with the gifts. We visualize ourselves all gathered around this great altar, the second station in heaven. Here the priest on behalf of the community, in the person of Christ, presents the gifts to the Father. Typically, the presider prays, "Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer...this wine to offer." Here we visualize all our offerings taken up in the collection being presented to God the Father, not just the bread and wine.

Then we move into the Preface and Eucharistic prayer. Through their various petitions and praises, these prayers bring many images to our mind. The Preface is a sacrifice of thanksgiving. We use words like, "Father, all powerful and ever-living God, we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks." Giving God thanks is a sacrifice, a joyous and healing experience. We think of all for which we are grateful and lift it to the Father, as if returning it to him. It contrasts with and balances the crosses and setbacks we may have presented and been burden with earlier.

Next is the Sanctus: "Holy, holy, holy Lord God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory." We again see the Angels and Saints all around us. Since the beginning of creation many of them have been making this offering. We now join them in this eternal praise and worship.

The next great event in the Mass is the Consecration. In the person of the celebrant, who stands in the person of Christ, we change the gift of bread and wine into his body and blood, the gift of Christ sacrificed on behalf of all creation. When the priest bows slightly and says the words of consecration I like to think of how God created the world. He said, "Let there be light" and there was. So too when the priest says, "This is my body" or "This is the cup of my blood" it simply is. When the priest raises the host and then the chalice, we see ourselves at Mt. Calvary offering this one sacrifice. Using our imagination, we see all our personal offerings that were brought to the altar by the gift bearers, united to this perfect sacrifice of Jesus. Indeed, we see ourselves with Christ on the Cross. It is at this moment, united to the one true sacrifice, that we and our sacrifices have redemptive value and power.

So there we are in heaven gathered around that great altar offering this one perfect sacrifice to which we have united all our personal offerings from our daily lives. We recognize there is only one sacrifice of the Mass, Christ Crucified on Mt. Calvary. Each Mass simply makes that one sacrifice present to us, it removes the distance of time and we are at the foot of the cross. We see this, experience this, as the priest elevates the host and then the chalice, right after the words of consecration.

What happens next? The prayers change after the Consecration. We ask the Father, in various ways in this part of the Eucharistic prayer, that this sacrifice will bear fruit, that is, take hold, in our hearts and minds, and in all peoples throughout the world, believer and nonbeliever alike. We say words like, "Look with favor on your Church's offering. Grant that we may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ. May he make us an everlasting gift to you enabling us to share in the inheritance of your Saints. May this sacrifice, which has made our peace with you, advance the peace and salvation of all the world." In all these prayers we ask God that by the grace of this sacrament, what is in heaven will be one day on earth. It recalls the petition of Our Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven." Yet, at that moment, gathered with the Angels and Saints around the altar of heaven, we can temporarily experience through grace and imagination, divine unity and peace; the kingdom that one day will come. To all this, we sing the Great Amen, and with this, the Liturgy of the Eucharist ends.

We now leave the altar and approach the third and highest station during our Eucharistic visit to heaven, the great banquet table. We enter the Communion Rite. The Communion Rite is the highest point in the Mass. We appropriately begin by praying the prayer Jesus taught us. It seems perfectly designed to prepare us for the experience of perfect communion with the Father and each other. The prayers that follow the Lord's Prayer -- preparing us for Holy Communion -- seem designed

to break down potential barriers to communion, communion not just with Jesus and through him with the Father and the Holy Spirit, but with one another. After the Lord's Prayer, we pray for freedom from anxiety. During the Sign of Peace, we pray, "Look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church and grant us the peace and unity of your kingdom." It is a time to recall not only our sins toward God but also our sins toward one and other, and those committed against us. Recalling all this, we offer forgiveness in our hearts toward those that may be receiving Holy Communion with us and seek God's forgiveness and theirs so our communion may be genuine, making us more truly the Mystical Body of Christ. At this time, we extend a sign of peace to those around us. We should however recall all our brothers and sisters, especially those we struggle to forgive, and imagine ourselves extending them a sign of peace, not just the parishioner standing next to us.

Next we see the priest break the host and place a small piece in the chalice. It reminds us of Paul's words in, 1 Corinthians 10:17, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." We can imagine the priest breaking one large loaf of bread into enough pieces for all those who come to the Lord's banquet table. It is a reminder of the power of a banquet. We can remember our favorite family gatherings. Each time we partook in the same family foods and traditions, we became family all that much more. The bonds were strengthened. As we partook in our favorite family specialties, perhaps prepared by mother or grandmother, it was also the time together, and the life stories shared, that made us little by little more perfectly one. Similarly, but in reference to our spiritual family, all this is experienced in the one loaf broken and participated in by the communicants.

Next we hear the words, "This is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper." We respond, "Lord I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I will be healed." In this we acknowledge we are not worthy to be welcomed into his family, the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, and through it into the Triune family; God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We recognize we are not worthy to receive the life of God himself, through receiving Holy Communion, his body, soul and divinity. Yet we are filled with the hope of the Centurion when we say, "Just say the word, and I shall be healed."

As we enter the communion line and approach the banquet table, we can imagine ourselves around the great banquet table, the third and highest station of heaven. We see the Lord serving each of us. He shares a spiritual food that unites us with himself and his family and makes us all brothers and sisters. It brings about the kingdom. It is like but far surpasses those treasured moments we experienced with our families on those Christmas, Easter, or Thanksgiving days we often recall with great nostalgia. We meditate upon the similar family experience we, please God, have experienced as Christians in our parishes and in our diocese. As we receive Holy Communion, we attempt to imagine and be open to the signs and

foreshadowings God may give us of the perfect communion that will be eternal life. After we have received, we complete our meditation, our visit to the highest station of heaven, the banquet table, with the Prayer after Communion.

We now enter the Concluding Rite. Although we have in this sacrifice and in this banquet, experienced the kingdom, we cannot stay here in meditation. This rite prepares us to go forth, leave heaven, if you will, and return to the world bringing the kingdom that we experienced, to the earth. It is as if we are acting on those words, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Eventually, we hear the words or similar words, "The Mass is ended, Go in peace." The name for the Sacred Banquet, "Mass", comes from this command, rooted in the fact that we cannot remain in this heavenly transfiguration moment, but must go back into the world to serve and build up the kingdom on earth.

As we sing the Recessional Hymn, we see ourselves following the cross bearer. We see ourselves journeying from the highest station, the banquet table, past the altar or Mt. Calvary, past the ambo or the Word of God, through the gates of heaven, down the long white hall to our parish exits. Now outside our parish churches, we once again find ourselves clothed as 21st century Americans. But we remember what we saw and experienced. We carry the life, teachings and grace of God's kingdom within. We return to our families and our society to share this gift in service, building up his kingdom, until we once again revisit heaven next Sunday, with the assembly at our local parish.