The Mass Part 5: The Consecration

Now that the bread and wine — the fruit of our lives — are at a dignified place on the altar, the assembly stands and begins a dialogue with the priest that's difficult to translate:

"The Lord be with you."

"And also with you" (literally, "and with your spirit").

So far, so good. "Sursum corda," the Latin says next. This has no verb and means literally, "upward hearts." Is the priest telling the people to "lift up your hearts," as our missal has it, or is he saying hearts are already there? Or both? The Latin is ambiguous, and has always been way back to at least A.D. 200.

I mention the ambiguity for two reasons.

First, you may have heard that a new translation of the Mass is in the works, which might be finished by the end of 2009. It will be closer to the original Latin than the current missal.

You may wonder, "What's taking so long? How hard is it for experts to do a translation?" Well, harder than it seems. Our present text has been criticized because the translation was done too hastily in the 1960s and the changes happened too rapidly. The U.S. bishops don't want to repeat that haste.

Secondly, a theological point: Liturgy is multivalent, meaning it can be understood in many ways. Prayer is ultimately the language of lovers — us and God — and how does one pin down love?

I ask my students, "What's the meaning of a kiss?" It depends on who does it, to whom, when, how, etc. The symbolic language of liturgy also cannot be confined. Though theology tries to articulate it (remember "lex orandi, lex credendi" — "the law of believing, is the law of praying"), we can never fully understand it.

The language of prayer is more poetic than scientific; it moves the heart even more than the mind, which bows in awe before the miracle of the Eucharist.

Theologians use the word “transubstantiation” for this miracle. This means a change of substance: bread and wine become Jesus’ true body and blood.

This word relies on ancient Greek philosophical categories of “substance” and “accidents.” Substance means the “what” a thing is — a chair, a song, a loaf of bread — and accidents means how the “what” appears: hard or soft, heavy, light, chewy, etc.

After eucharistic transubstantiation the accidents remain: bread and wine appear the same as before. But they are not bread and wine anymore: their substance is now the body and blood of Jesus Christ himself. As he told his followers, “My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.”

Though our minds can’t fully grasp the change, we can trace the outline of the prayer. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal lists seven basic parts of all eucharistic prayers.

— Thanksgiving, including the dialogue and the preface in which the church thanks God the Father for the salvation wrought in Christ.

— Acclamation, when the church joins the angelic and heavenly hosts in crying out, “Holy! Holy! Holy!’

— Epiclesis, a Greek word meaning “calling down.” The priest asks the Father to send the Holy Spirit upon the gifts to change them; and later he calls the Spirit down on the assembly, to change us so we also become the body of Christ.

“You are what you eat” is St. Augustine’s phrase that originally means not “eat healthy and you’ll be healthy;” it connects the church and the Eucharist, both as the body of Christ.

— Words of institution. The priest repeats Jesus’ own words at the Last Supper. Note that the priest is not “play-acting.” He does not pretend to be Jesus and treat the assembly as apostles, telling them, “Take this, all of you. . .” Instead, these words are still part of a prayer addressed to the Father.

— Anamnesis, another Greek word, means “making memory.” In week one, I

mentioned “remembering in the strong liturgical sense,” not merely reminiscing about what Jesus did 2,000 years ago in the Upper Room. Rather, by making memory, salvation is actualized, really present among us here and now.

— Intercessions occur in various places and usually mention the pope and local bishop by name, as well as saints, our beloved dead, and “any others for whom we now pray.”

— Doxology is the closing part when we give the Father all glory and honor through the Son in the Spirit. The assembly responds with the Great Amen: Let it be so! Let our lives be all for the glory of God. Such is a fitting way to end all prayers, and the great eucharistic prayer is the most excellent prayer of all.

But wait: there’s more. For what happens next, you’ll have to read the next installment of this series.

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