

## The Eucharistic Prayer: our response to God's invitation

By Lisa Maxson

What congregations say and hear at Mass will change with the new English translation of the Roman Missal, but the meaning of what one Catholic theologian calls the greatest prayer of the church is unchanged.

The Eucharistic Prayer, heard in the middle of every liturgy around the world, recalls the saving mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection and is the highest point of every Mass, says Msgr. Joseph DeGrocco, professor of liturgy and director of liturgical formation at Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington, New York.

The new translation does not change what's happening during the Mass, especially during the consecration, he says. It just brings the words said closer to the literal Latin translation.

"We believe that when the church prays the Eucharistic Prayer, that mystery is actually made present," Msgr. DeGrocco says. "Within that prayer, as part of that making present the mystery, the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ."

Various forms of the Eucharistic Prayer will continue to be used throughout the year, depending on liturgical seasons and special occasions, Msgr. DeGrocco says. Each form expresses the essential beliefs of the Catholic Church, but emphasizes different aspects of the theology, he says.

In addition to four principal Eucharistic Prayers, Eucharistic Prayer forms exist for Masses of reconciliation and Masses for various needs and occasions.

Essentially the priest is free to choose whichever prayer he wants to use, but there are guidelines and aspects of good liturgical practice and theology that make some prayers more appropriate at times than others.

Each of the expressions of Eucharistic Prayer offers an emphasis, says Eileen Burke-Sullivan, S.T.D., assistant professor of Pastoral and Systematic Theology and director of the Master of Arts in Ministry Program at Creighton University in Omaha.

The reconciliation canons are usually prayed during Lent or during other times of public repentance or calls to repentance and forgiveness, she says.

The canons of various needs and occasions can be prayed when a group is gathered for a particular purpose, such as an assembly of school teachers, or a Eucharistic Congress, or a convention of musicians. While the assembly is probably not a regular Sunday congregation, it would be appropriate to pray one of the versions of this canon at a Eucharistic celebration that, for example, missions the parish council or liturgical ministers, Burke-Sullivan says.

In 1973, Eucharistic Prayers for Masses with children were added to offer a simplified version of the Eucharistic Prayer to help children better understand the mystery and be engaged in the prayer, says Father Peter Mitchell, a professor of liturgy at St. Gregory the Great Seminary in Seward, Neb. These prayers were reserved for liturgies where young children were the primary assembly. While these texts are not included in the new edition of the Missal, the Conference of Bishops will consider their future use.

The Eucharistic Prayer is the Body of Christ's response to the invitation it receives from God through the Word, Burke-Sullivan says.

"The response is always gratitude and it is always transformative," she says, but no words can possibly say it all.

By listening to the different Eucharistic Prayers throughout the year, people gain a better understanding of the beliefs of the Catholic Church.

"The way the prayers are written gives a sense of why and when they help the assembly to understand more fully how it is called to act more fully in the person of Christ," she says.

Msgr. DeGrocco agrees.

"The greater number of texts allows us to explore and enter in to the mystery of Christ in all its richness and various facets in a deeper way."

The Eucharistic Prayer is the prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification that takes place at the center of the Mass. During the prayer, one hears an account of Jesus' actions and his words at the Last Supper and the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ.

The Eucharistic Prayer takes place after the Liturgy of the Word and the offertory and is introduced by a Preface. The congregation kneels or stands during the Eucharistic Prayer, which ends at the singing of the Great Amen.