

Homily - Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Behold, I have prepared my banquet... everything is ready; come to the feast.”

Prayer, as we discussed in last weekend’s homily, may be easiest to understand as a heart-to-heart conversation with God.

In that reflection, we were focused on personal prayer, where we enter into that conversation as individuals, in a way that reflects our own spiritualities and needs.

But this, we know, isn’t the only kind of prayer in the life of the Church.

The most important and central form of prayer is that which we are engaged in at this very moment - the celebration of the Mass, which is the primary act of what we call “liturgical” prayer, the prayer of the Church united in the worship of God through the sacramental mediation of Jesus Christ.

In the Mass, we participate mystically in the heavenly banquet that Christ himself speaks of in the Gospel’s parable.

And yet, it’s so easy to miss the reality of what is happening in this prayer, simply because the way in which we experience that grace here in this life is as a reality that is most often invisible and intangible.

In his letters, Saint Paul speaks of the challenge of looking for God in these unseen realities. For many people, as he says in his second letter to the Corinthians, these realities are ‘veiled’ by the effects of sin or simple ignorance.

But that doesn’t mean this spiritual reality is entirely inaccessible.

In fact, the structure, actions, and prayers of the Mass can help us recognize and pray in harmony with this reality if we pay attention to what it is we’re doing and saying.

There’s no way I can unpack every dimension of every action and prayer - scholars make their careers writing entire enormous books about this topic, after all - but I want to hit a few specific moments that we can pray with and keep in mind to help enrich our personal experience of the Mass and better appreciate our greatest prayer.

In fact, the best place to start is actually before we even get to the Mass itself.

If I asked you when the prayer of the liturgy starts, you'd probably suggest the opening dialogue, or maybe the procession with the opening hymn.

But for each of us, the actual process of praying the Mass should begin before we even step into the building.

There's a principle in Catholic theology that we experience the action of God in a way that reflects where our soul, mind, and humanity are at in the moment we encounter it.

So, here's a question: how did you prepare for Mass today?

Were you able to take the time to reflect on what would happen when you got here? Did you feel rushed? Were you able to call to mind particular intentions you wanted to pray for in this liturgy?

Often, our life of prayer is just one more thing we're trying to squeeze into our schedules, and it's true that especially in family life there are lots of natural challenges to centering our lives, even our weekends, on prayer.

But it's a question we need to ask ourselves: are we able to prepare for the Mass in a way that is different than any other activity?

How do we reflect that in our actions to keep this day holy?

I think if we do nothing else to pray the Mass better, we should start with that - our mindsets and souls will mirror our actions.

Then, once we're here, it's good to be intentional and mindful about the gestures and actions of the Mass itself.

Especially if we grew up Catholic, a lot of it is just reflexive muscle memory at this point, but there are specific categories and even directions about how we move and act.

These directives are largely contained in what's called the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, which is literally a book that tells the universal Church how to celebrate and pray the Mass.

Here's what it says about genuflection and signs of reverence in the liturgy:

First, it tells us why on earth we have all these signs and gestures in the first place.

"The gestures and posture of the priest, the deacon, and the ministers, as well as those of the people," it says, "ought to contribute to making the entire celebration resplendent with beauty and noble simplicity, so that the true and full meaning of the different parts of the celebration is evident and that the participation of all is fostered."

That's a big goal! We might not feel like our individual gestures and reverence contribute very much, but the Church is saying that every small choice adds up to making the Mass 'resplendent with beauty and noble simplicity.'

Notice what else it's saying: our personal reverence helps the rest of the Church pray and participate. There's a lot at stake and we can contribute to that prayer!

The instruction also gives us a number of directives for what those gestures should look like. It's actually very specific:

"A genuflection, made by bending the right knee to the ground, signifies adoration, and therefore it is reserved for the Most Blessed Sacrament.

A bow signifies reverence and honor shown to the persons themselves or to the signs that represent them. There are two kinds of bow: a bow of the head and a bow of the body.

A bow of the head is made when the three Divine Persons are named together and at the names of Jesus, of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of the Saint in whose honor Mass is being celebrated."

In addition to specific prayers offered by the priest, "A bow of the body, that is to say, a profound bow, is made to the altar... and in the Creed at the words 'and by the Holy Spirit . . . and became man.'"

So, those are your three gestures: a genuflection, a bow of the head, and a 'profound' bow of the body.

You can also add kneeling to that list.

According to the General Instruction, 'In the dioceses of the United States of America, they should kneel beginning after the singing or recitation of the Sanctus, that is, the singing of the "Holy, Holy" until after the Amen of the Eucharistic Prayer... The faithful also kneel after the Lamb of God and either kneel or sit after receiving communion.'

Finally, one of the most important moments of the liturgy itself is when we receive communion.

After processing reverently, the Instruction says, "When receiving Holy Communion, the communicant bows his or her head before the Sacrament as a gesture of reverence and receives the Body of the Lord from the minister. "The priest raises the host slightly and shows it to each, saying, 'The Body of Christ'. The communicant replies, Amen, and receives the Sacrament either on the tongue or, where this is allowed and if the communicant so chooses, in the hand. As soon as the communicant receives the host, he or she consumes it entirely."

We should be intentional about each of these actions, because each one expresses our faith that Jesus Christ is indeed present in the Blessed Sacrament.

Think about our children - they learn as much, likely even more, from watching what we do than from what we say.

Our actions can speak louder than words in many cases.

Now, what about the prayers themselves? There's so much that could be said about the content of the liturgical prayers.

Many of them change from week to week, especially depending on the season and day.

The texts the Church chooses guide our hearts through the rhythms of prayer during the year, and more often than not will reveal the central mystery that we should be praying with on any given day.

In addition, the Church also gives us choices of other prayers so that we can respond suitably and effectively as we pray the Mass.

As a priest, I have the responsibility of choosing many of those prayers to best bring together the intentions and concerns of the community with what's happening in the liturgical life of the Church and the needs of the parish or the world as a whole.

This week, for instance, we are united in concern over the outbreak of violence in the Holy Land, and so in a few minutes, I will be using one of the Eucharistic Prayers that are given to us to pray specifically for intentions of reconciliation and healing.

I would encourage you to listen carefully to the words of those prayers - they will be similar but also different from what you've heard on any other Sunday, and they give voice to the Church's prayers of intercession in this time.

There are other moments of the Mass where it's especially fitting for us to pay attention and offer our intentions for that day.

One is the opening prayer, or "Collect" - this is the first time, right after the Gloria, that you'll hear me chant the phrase "let us pray" - the General Instruction describes it this way:

"Next the priest invites the people to pray. All, together with the priest, observe a brief silence so that they may be conscious of the fact that they are in God's presence and may formulate their petitions mentally. Then the priest says the prayer which is customarily known as the collect and through which the character of the celebration is expressed."

This prayer, in other words, brings together all of our needs and intentions, and offers them together to God as we begin the Mass, in a way which also reflects the intentions of the entire Church on that day in our liturgical calendar.

So we're praying at the same time both as individuals and as one united Body in Christ. Both dimensions are important and happen simultaneously. Similarly, the Offertory Prayer is a beautiful moment in which we offer our intentions and petitions in the spiritual offering of the Eucharistic gifts that are brought up in procession.

In our more solemn liturgies, you'll also notice that right before this prayer, this is one place where the priest will incense the offerings, which symbolizes your prayers rising up to God.

All of these signs, in other words, remind us of what should be happening internally as we pray through the Mass.

And then, the third of these prayers that change from Mass to Mass comes at the conclusion of the Communion Rite, in which, as the Instruction says,

"To bring to completion the prayer of the People of God, and also to conclude the entire Communion Rite, the priest says the Prayer after Communion, in which he prays for the fruits of the mystery just celebrated."

We're giving thanks for what we have received and asking the Lord to strengthen our hearts through that sacrament as we get ready to go back into the world to live our faith.

Again, all of this just scratches the surface.

There's always so much more to learn about the prayer of the Church and the way we can enter into the Mass, but we can boil it down to several key takeaways, and I strongly encourage all of us to consider how we can make them real, practical actions for ourselves and our families.

First, how can we prepare better for Mass? What's even one thing you can do to have a more prayerful, reverent, joyful anticipation for this time of prayer?

If you have kids at home, this will look different for you than for someone else. But we should all find ways to do something to make this day special.

Second, make an effort to make actions and gestures meaningful and intentional when we pray.

Genuflect before stepping into your pew as a real act of prayer and adoration. Receive communion joyfully and intentionally. Live out in your bodies the unified prayer of the Church itself.

And finally, simply paying attention and trying your best to pray along with the actual words and prayers of the Church will always help us enter more deeply into the mysteries of the faith.

You'll never catch everything every time, and that's okay. That's why the Church is praying on your behalf - why Christ himself offers this sacrifice of praise, mediated through this liturgy, to his heavenly Father.

But if we can do just a little bit more, learn to love and pray just a little bit better, it can make all the difference in the world.

That veil between us and the heavenly realities of this Mass will become that much more accessible as we grow in devotion.

And in time, God willing, with the help and power of his merciful love, that great wedding banquet of heaven itself will one day open before our eyes.