



An Instructed Eucharist - How We Worship

General Introduction - Before the Service Begins:

Before there was a New Testament or creeds as we know them, Christians gathered together for worship very similar to today's form that we know as Holy Eucharist. As we read in Acts, Christians gathered for the 'breaking of the bread and the prayers.' The drama of the Holy Eucharist has from the days of the early Church been the central event in Christian worship and provides a pattern for Christian living. It is designed to teach us, feed us, and inspire us.

But worship may not always be inspiring or meaningful. It may seem confusing, boring, and repetitious. In our worship, there is much ritual and intentional pattern, but ritual without meaning becomes idol worship. If a pattern is not understood, it adds nothing. A narrated service helps make clearer and more obvious the drama which is taking place. With understanding we are better able to know and experience God's presence in our worship.

Our service, our liturgy, is something we all engage in, not just the priest. Everyone has a role in the service - you are people gathered for worship - a congregation, not an audience. In fact, God is the audience of our worship, not us.

We are a celebrant community - offering praise and thanksgiving. The priest cannot celebrate alone. Eucharist is always an event done in community, and at least two people must be present. But to take it further -- God is the primary actor. When we are gathered -- two or three or more in Jesus's name -- God in the Holy Spirit is with us. God is working in us and through us.

While the service has two parts, the liturgy of the Word of God and liturgy of Table or Sacrament, they are a unified whole in this sense. Each element of the service feeds us in some way -- fed, body, mind and spirit—preparing us to go into the world to spread the Good News.

At the entrance of the Ministers, with or without a processional hymn, it is customary for the people to stand. [It is also customary to bow in respect to the Cross or the gospel book as they pass in procession. Music has the function of covering movement. But it has a much deeper meaning. Singing together is a means of involving and unifying the congregation.]

Our music ministry's chief purpose is to lead us in praise of God, to help elevate our minds and hearts to the holy one. While the choir may offer anthems, they are not performing and we are not the audience. Again, God is the audience, and their playing and singing is solely to give glory to God.]

Before the Procession[al], it is appropriate to spend the time in quiet preparation for worship. Many people say a prayer immediately upon entering their pew. Read the lessons or the words to the opening hymn. Or simply quiet the rush and noise from the world outside and make the transition to the "real world." Silence is an integral part of worship. God spoke to Elijah in the still small voice -- it takes silence to hear God sometimes. Silence is used throughout the service so people can reflect on what they've heard, offer silent prayers, and prepare for encountering God. [Preparing for worship in silence, we can be ready to worship when the organ hits the first note of the processional.]

As is our custom, let us now pause long enough to quiet our hearts and our minds as we prepare to worship this day.

(Silence--The Processional Hymn at 10:30)

The service begins with an acclamation. It states briefly what we are assembled to do. First, we are here to “bless God” - second, we are here to “bless God’s kingdom”. --- Many people find it meaningful to make the sign of the cross at this point to affirm these blessings and accept the blessing personally.

The Collect for Purity follows the acclamation. In it we are reminded that God knows us through and through. We ask the Holy Spirit to cleanse and inspire us and make us worthy for entering into worship. This is preparation for entering the presence of God.

The “Gloria in Excelsis” (or Glory to God) is an ancient morning hymn which states the two-fold objective of the Christian liturgy - to glorify God and to communicate peace to God’s people.

The presider then formally greets the assembled congregation with an ancient Jewish type of salutation, “The Lord be with you”. The congregation responds: “And also with you.” We say it so routinely - all the time. Yet, it is powerful language. “The Lord be with you.” -- and we acknowledge that God is in our presence. Jesus promised us he would be with us, when we meet in his name. So when you use that to gather attention - remember what you are doing –acknowledging God’s presence with us.

Next is the Collect of the Day. This is a short prayer which collects the overall theme found in the readings of Holy Scripture for the day and focuses our attention.

(Acclamation through The Collect of the Day)

Before the Biblical Readings:

The biblical material and the preaching are at the heart of the Liturgy of the Word. You will hear more Scripture read week after week in the Episcopal Church than in most any other Church. We use four readings from Holy Scripture - normally a lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, a psalm, a passage from the Epistles of the New Testament, and then a passage from one of the four Gospels. The Hebrew Scripture lesson and the Epistle are most appropriately read by lay members of the congregation. After each lesson the reader declares it “The Word of the Lord”, and we respond “Thanks be to God.” We do not say, “This is the Word of God,” for the Word of God is not contained or frozen in the writing. The written scripture is the primary, reliable and time tested gift from those who preceded us in faith, and it is the starting place to begin a conversation about what God is doing among us now. In fact, the bible itself tells us that the word of God is not a writing, but person—Jesus—the word made flesh who dwelt among us.

Sitting is the appropriate posture during the reading of the lesson, psalm and epistle, as this a time when we learn. Likewise, we will sit for the sermon, which follows the reading of the Holy Gospel.

The Holy Gospel is not read primarily for instruction, but so that we may, in a sacramental manner, hear Jesus speak to us through His own words. Because the Gospel is “Good News” intended to be brought into the midst of the people, we have a Gospel Procession, bringing the book of the Gospels from the altar to the nave to act out the coming of the Good news, and we stand as we are able, to acknowledge the presence of Christ in His Holy Word as we receive the Good News. All should turn and the face the

Gospel book. The Gospel is read by a deacon (or a priest if no deacon is present) because the church has ordained deacons to proclaim the Gospel to the world.

After Scripture has been proclaimed, the job of the sermon is to break it open – in the sense of exploring its meaning and application in daily life

(The Lesson, Psalm, Epistle, Gospel, and sermon)

Following the Sermon

After we have heard God speak to us and had some application for our own time, it is time for us to respond. The congregation is invited to stand as we are able and join in professing the faith in the words of the Nicene Creed. The Creeds were originally used at Baptisms to summarize the story of salvation and what we believe about God, and, especially, the incarnation-- God becoming human through Jesus. We say “We believe...” remembering that we are joining ourselves to the great heritage of the one holy catholic and apostolic church down through the centuries. This heritage is vaster, richer, and more mysterious than any one of us understands, but we share it with all who have gone before and commit ourselves to it.

Understand please, this is the Church’s creed. It may not be in every respect your personal creed, or adequately express your understanding of the vastness of the mystery of God. But still we add our voices to this way of following God as coming to us in the intimacy of a human being, Jesus Christ. This is why we commend this way of imagining the holy with us now.

Being the people of God carries with it the great responsibility of caring for others. We begin to accept this responsibility in the intercessory prayers. As we pray for our neighbors, the Church, and our nation, we are not only asking God to work in this world, but also offering ourselves to help in any way we can. If you want to know the mission of the Church, read the prayers of the people. What we pray for, we should be willing to work for. We burn Isaiah’s words into our hearts, “Here I am, Lord. Send me.”

In the General Confession, we confess our separation from God, from others, from ourselves. This separation is sometimes caused by things we have done wrong, --- and more often - by things we should have done and didn’t. We then receive absolution of our sins through our Lord Jesus Christ. God forgives our sins, accepts us, and strengthens us to meet the future. We kneel or stand as we are able for the General Confession.

For private confession with a priest or trusted Christian friend, our prayer book has a separate, brief liturgy called the Reconciliation of a Penitent. Reconciliation is a sacramental rite of our church.

(The Creed, Prayers of the People, Confession and Absolution)

Following the Absolution:

The Peace is like a hinge, tying together the two halves of the liturgy. We have heard God’s voice in Scripture, Sermon and Creeds, which often confronts us. We have confessed our sins, been forgiven, and are now reconciled to God and our neighbor. In the peace, we act out the fact that we are now cleansed, reconciled, and made into One Body - the Body of Christ. We can only have that unity because God is remaking the broken people who entered the door into new people. We have been re-made into new people and into One Body. The Peace expresses that reality.

The Peace may be expressed by words of greeting, by a handshake, or by an embrace. This is a joyful moment in the liturgy, but it is not merely that. It is not the friendly greeting given over the coffee pot, or introductions to newcomers. Our primary purpose in the Peace is to give and receive the greeting of the Risen Lord who brought, and still brings, the blessing of His peace to His followers.

Beyond a symbolic act, the passing of the peace is an opportunity to make things right with those in this very assembly who may have something against us, or whom we have *offended*].

(The Peace and the Offertory Sentence)

Before the Offertory Hymn/setting the table—motion Music Director to wait.

After the Peace, we move into the Liturgy of the Table. The change is made visual by the movement of the presider. Now, the celebrant moves to the altar, focusing our attention on the meal around the Table.

There are FOUR great actions in the liturgy of the Table each mirror our Lord's actions at the Last Supper. Our Lord first "took" bread and wine; second, He "gave thanks" for or "blessed" the bread and wine; third, He "broke" the bread; and fourth, He "gave" the bread and wine to his disciples to eat and drink. Take - bless - break - give.

The first action, the "taking", is usually called the Offertory. The offering is always bread, the basic element of all meals, and, wine, the age-old beverage of human society. These stand for all food and drink. In the first century church, the celebration of Holy Eucharist was normally followed by a community meal. Church members would bring bread and wine for the meal and give it to the deacon at the rear of the sanctuary. At the appropriate time, the deacon would take a small portion of those gifts to the altar for use in the Eucharist. Although our service is configured somewhat differently today, we still follow that tradition. Members of the congregation, representing the entire congregation bring the gifts of bread and wine forward to the altar to be placed on the altar. The offering represents expressions of our own daily life and work as they are produced from God's gifts of wheat and grapes. The final product represents what we do with God's gifts -- the combination of God's gifts and our industry. Our tithes and offerings of food for the hungry are collected and offered to God with the bread and wine. Originally many people brought the actual fruits of their labor. All is set upon the table -- symbolizing our lives. All we have and are is offered to God to be blessed, that these elements, along with those gathered, may become the body of Christ, broken, and given to the rest of a hungry and thirsty world.

Our offering also includes ourselves, our souls and bodies, as a reasonable, holy sacrifice. We join our offering with Christ's offering. St. Augustine, in the Fifth Century, said to the newly confirmed communicants at the Easter liturgy: "There you are upon the table; there you are in the chalice." Or, as we say every Sunday, Behold what you are, become what you receive, the Body of Christ, broken and given for the world.

At the Offertory, a little water is mixed with the wine. This is an ancient custom going back to Jewish times. The original purpose of it was simply to dilute the wine, which was thick. It also can signify humanity mixed with divinity in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Please stand as you are able at the time of the presentation of our alms, the collection plates, as we prepare to stand for the Great Thanksgiving.

(Set the Table)

Before the Great Thanksgiving:

Our Lord took bread, and then wine, and gave thanks over them. So, in the Christian liturgy, after the bread and wine have been “taken” and placed on the altar, we move into the second action, the “Thanksgiving.”

We stand as we are able at the Sursum Corda, where we “lift our hearts unto the Lord,” and we are lifted out of time and space into the Divine Presence. In the Sanctus - Holy, Holy, Holy, -- we share the vision of St. John of the heavenly banquet.

Standing together reminds us that we together are people of the resurrection, being reconciled to God through Christ in the great Paschal mystery. This is also why we encourage communicants especially to stand to receive communion during the great fifty days of Easter. Kneeling is a more penitential posture, a reminder that the Eucharist is for the forgiveness of sins. Eucharistic Prayer C juxtaposes both of these reflections on the sacrament in these words: “Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength. For pardon only, and not for renewal.”

The words of The Great Thanksgiving summarize the history and future of salvation. The story of the Last Supper, the resurrection and hope for new life are stamped on this bread and this wine. We discover the Risen Lord really present with the people. From Christ, we ask the blessing of the Holy Spirit, called the epiclesis, not only to make bread and wine the signs of Christ’s presence, but also to transform us as well to be signs of Christ’s life in the world. We remember the past in a way that it becomes true in the present and prepares us for the future.

While the presider speaks for all of us in the prayer of thanksgiving, the entire congregation affirms all that is said with a heart-felt “AMEN.” at the end. You’ll notice it is the only AMEN in all caps in the entire service. Speak it with conviction.

In fact, no prayer is complete anywhere in the liturgy unless we have joined in the “amen” that concludes it. Please stand as you are able for the beginning of The Great Thanksgiving, as we sing the presentation hymn.

(The Great Thanksgiving)

Before the Lord’s Prayer:

The Lord’s Prayer is both a conclusion to The Great Thanksgiving and an introduction to the Breaking of the Bread. The Breaking of the Bread is the third action of the Liturgy of the Table. It remembers Christ’s suffering and death, He being broken on the Cross.

We come now to the fourth and final action of the Liturgy of the Table, the ‘giving’. Following the triumphal acclamation, “Alleluia. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us...,” the priest invites the congregation to come forward with the words of invitation, “Behold what you are. Become what you receive. All are welcome. These are the gifts of God for the people of God, holy food for God's holy and beloved people. Amen.

The sacrament is administered with one of two brief sets of words. Each communicant should respond “Amen.” to the sentence of administration when taking the elements, the bread or wine, either before or after taking them into his or her mouth.

You may receive either standing, as people of the resurrection, or kneeling, which is more penitential. Either is appropriate.

(Lord's Prayer through The Communion)

Following the Communion of the People:

In the conclusion of the service a post-communion prayer gives thanks for making us part of Christ's body and feeding us --- and commits us to mission as disciples of Christ.

A priest may pronounce a Blessing after the prayer. When there is a concluding Blessing, it is customary to make the sign of the cross as an indication of our reception of God's Blessing.

Then we process into the world. We leave the church building to go out and be the Church.

Some say the dismissal following the processional is the most important moment in the service because it calls for the People of God, having been fed and formed by the Body of Christ, to go out through the doors of the Church to be the body of Christ in the world. One church I visited had a sign above the door of their nave that read, quite aptly, "Now your service begins."

Worship which stops short of ministry is sterile and ultimately becomes idolatry. Only in the world can the fulfillment of God's will be made complete. There - what we celebrate in liturgy becomes realized in life. There - the world is changed more and more to become the Kingdom of God.

(Post-communion Prayer, Blessing, Peace, Procession into the World and Dismissal)