

THE GATES OF HEAVEN ARE LIGHTLY LOCKED: PART IX
THE POETRY AND THEMES OF THE THIRD AND FOURTH EUCHARISTIC PRAYERS

I. The Third Eucharistic Prayer emphasizes the themes of the calling of God's Holy People and the importance of the pure sacrifice in making us worthy to be in God's presence. Its oblation and intercessions also present a series of images of God's promise to His faithful people.

A. After the Sanctus, the Prayer continues the praise of God and then continues onto the theme of holiness coming from God, enlivening all of creation and call His people to be united in their sacrificial lives. The progress of praising God for His holiness in Himself, in creation, and finally in the calling of a people reflects the vision in Revelation of the angels praising God, as well as Daniel's companions calling upon creation to praise God even as they are in the midst of the fire. See Daniel 3:52-90; Rev. 4:8-13.

1. Once again, the prayer begins with the theme of recognizing God's holiness, and the fact that He is surrounded by praise, as the prophets and St. John did when brought before the throne of God. See Isaiah 6:5; Dan. 3:52-56; Rev.19-20; 4:2-11.

2. Along with the angels in heaven, we then recognize God's holiness as reflected in the goodness of His creation. See Rev. 4:11; Dan. 3:53-58. Creation itself gives glory to God by reflecting His holiness. See Ps. 19:1-3; Tobit 8:5; Daniel 3:59-81.

3. It is the Holy Spirit, the love of the Father and the Son so powerful that that love becomes a person, Who gives this holiness to creation and life to all living things, whom God created in the context of that love. See Gen. 1:2, 8:1 (the Spirit appearing as a wind at the first creation and at the rescue of Noah); Ps. 33:6. God also creates all things through the Spirit and through His Word, who is the Son. See John 1:1-3; Col. 1:16-17.

3. The Spirit then brings forth for God a new people, worthy of worshiping Him, as He did at Pentecost, fulfilling the words of the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel and Joel. Isaiah 44:3; Ezek. 36:25-37:14, 39:29; Joel 3:1-5; Acts 2:1-21, 4:31. See also Ps. 51:12-13. The idea of gathering people from the rising of the sun to its setting comes from the prophecies of Isaiah and Malachi, who condemned the injustice and lax sacrifices offered to God and spoke of a day when nations from would be gathered to give God rightful sacrifice, guided by the spirit of God. See Isaiah 59:15 – 60:7, 66:18-24; Mal. 1:11, 3:10-12.; see also Ps. 113:3 (calling all nations from east to west to praise God.) The new translation (consistent with the original Latin) uses the term "from the rising of the sun to its setting," not only to be more poetic, but also to emphasize a unity of time as well as of space.

B. The epiclesis then calls upon God to send the Holy Spirit to make the bread and the wine holy and thus able to be the Body and Blood of Christ.

1. According to Isaiah, the Spirit would first come upon a rising king, who would then rule a kingdom of God's people. See Is. 11.

2. The Spirit came upon Mary at the Incarnation, and now continually at each Mass. See Luke 1:35. And the Spirit descended upon Jesus at His baptism and, through

Him, is was sent to all humanity. See Luke 3:21-22, 18:19, John 14:25-31, 15:26-27, 16:12-15.

3. Likewise, we ask the Holy Spirit to come upon the bread and wine that they may be the instrument through which Jesus becomes present, Who by becoming present, also gives us the Spirit that makes us holy and able to stand in God's presence.

C. The Institution Narrative is similar to the account in 1 Corinthians 11, but adding references to Jesus blessing the bread and breaking it. The similarity to the account in 1 Corinthians may have been an effort to emphasize St. Paul's theme of the unity of the Church in the Spirit that surrounds the account of the Last Supper in that letter. See 1 Cor. 11:17-22, 12:1-30; Enrico Mazzo, The Eucharistic Prayers of the Roman Rite 130-131.

1. The reference to Jesus blessing the bread and breaking it comes from the accounts of the Last Supper in all three of the Synoptic Gospels and again reflects the multiplication of the loaves. See Matt. 15:36, 26:26; Mark 6:41, 14:22; Luke 9:26, 22:19.

2. The breaking of one loaf of bread and giving it to all is also a symbol of the unity of the Church, receiving all of her blessings from the same source, Jesus Himself, sent by God the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit. 1 Cor. 10:16-17. In fact, it is ideal if all of the people receive the Eucharist from the one large broken host, although that is difficult as a practical matter if there are many present. See General Instructions to the Roman Missal 321; Norms for Communion Under Both Species 31.

D. The Anamnesis then emphasizes the Eucharist, not only as re-presenting the sacrifice of Jesus and making Him now present, but also, if received worthily, purifying us of sins and uniting us with heaven itself.

1. The reference to Jesus as "this holy and living sacrifice" reflects the fact that Jesus accomplishes what the dead animal sacrifices of the Old Testament could only symbolize, atonement for sins, reconciliation with God, and the consecration of the people. See Heb. 10:1-18; see also Mal. 3:1-5 (referring to the purifying power of the messenger of God); Ps. 40:7-9 (referring to the sacrifices as being replaced by the purification of the soul.)

2. Jesus said, "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day." John 6:54. There is, even now, a share in eternal life.

E. The Oblation again goes back to the fact that Jesus' sacrifice reconciles us to God and unites us as a people in the Spirit. See Eph. 1:3-11, 2:14-22

1. The oblation calls for a reconciliation with God and a unity with in the Church that will lead to a people worth for God.

2. The prayers then asks that, through Jesus, we become offerings to God, now acceptable to Him, as St. Paul emphasizes when, after describing Jesus; sacrifice for us, tells us to be "living sacrifices" in Him. See Romans 12:1-2; see also 1 Peter 2:4-

5, 9-10 (describing the faithful as a new, prophetic and priestly people, able to offer sacrifices to God); General Instructions 79(f). We are called to bring the sacrifices of Jesus into the world through our own lives in union with Him.

3. This desire to become a perfect gift to God brings us further into the communion of Mary and all the saints who have become perfect offerings to God, a fulfillment of the image in Hebrews of the people of God gathered around the new festive Mount Zion. See Heb. 12:1, 23; see also Rev. 7. And so the oblation once again asks God to bring about, through the Eucharist, a Church united throughout the world.

4. The oblation flows into the intercessions, asking God that we receive an inheritance with the saints. This notion comes from the promise of an estate or glorious lands to live within the kingdom of heaven. See, e.g., Matt 5:5, 25:34; Luke 19:11-27, Eph. 1:13-23.

F. The intercessions then ask that the Eucharist, which makes us one with Christ, bring the world more to the peace and salvation that He won.

1. We ask that the peace we have received with Christ bring about a greater peace and faith in the world. Part of the idea is that it is only through the grace of God given through Christ that people can overcome the antagonism that upsets the order intended by God. See, e.g., Eph. 2:14-22. We are asking that the Messianic visions of a peaceful kingdom that rewards goodness be fulfilled in this world as a first promise of the everlasting kingdom. See, e.g., Isaiah 2:1-4, 11:1-17; Joel 4:17-20; Amos 9:11-15; Micah 4:1-5; Rev. 21:22-22:5.

2. The intercessions then directly ask for God's blessings on His Church that Christ won for Himself, describing us as a "pilgrim" people. The idea is that the Church and her faithful are journeying through history towards the final fulfillment. See 2 Cor. 5:1, Eph. 2:19, Heb. 13:14. At the end of the journey the Church will be presented to Christ at last as His spotless bride. See Eph. 5:32-33; Rev. 19:7-8, 21:2-3, 9-10.

3. The intercessions then present the Church as a family, and the faithful as children of God. This idea picks up on the notion of Church as the household of God meant to live together as brothers and sisters. Eph. 2:19-22, 1 Peter 2:5.

G. As the intercessions continue, the Eucharistic Prayer continues on with prayers for the dead and for the living.

1. The intercessions ask for kind admittance to those who died pleasing to God. Of ourselves, we are not pleasing to God, but He makes us so. Jesus indicated that it is the Eucharist that makes us especially friend of God by saying at the Last Supper, "I no longer call you slaves but friends. . . . A slave does not know what His master is doing. I call you friends because I have told you everything I have heard from My Father." John 15:15-16.

2. The intercessions then ask that we also share the glorious vision of the glory of

God. We have a beginning of that vision on earth, which gives a first promise of that everlasting glory. See 1 Cor. 13:12-13; Heb. 12:18-24; 1 John 3:2; Vatican II Council, Sacrosanctum Concilium 8.

II. The Fourth Eucharistic Prayer describes the history of salvation in the context of a prayer. In this sense it is like the historical psalms, which praised God for His goodness, as shown through His providence towards His Chosen People. See Psalms 78, 105, 106, 114, 136. However, it expands the horizon into a vision of God's blessing bestowed upon all of creation.

A. The Preface describes God in Himself and in the heavens, praised by the angels, and calling all creation to Himself. The vision is of creation proceeding from God and returning to Him. The Book of Revelation ends with such themes of a new heavens and a new earth, and of a return of creation to God. See Rev. 21:1-4, 22-27. Isaiah also sets forth visions of a new heavens and a new earth, although more in earthly terms than the Book of Revelation. Is. 65:17-25, 66:22-24. There is a sense of the Mass drawing us into a realm above this fallen world.

1. It begins with praising God as the only true God and describes His eternity and life in "unapproachable light."

- This phrase itself comes from the first letter to Timothy, in which St. Paul gives a final exhortation to "lay hold of eternal life" by keeping to God's "noble commandment." 1 Tim. 6:16.

- Part of the idea is to emphasize the mystery and majesty of God. A common theme of St. John is the light of God and of God as the source of light, guiding us to glory and life, see, e.g., John 1:1-18, 3:19, 8:12, 9:5, 12:35-36, 46; 1 John 1:5-7. Even the angels veil their faces before the full light and glory of God. See Is. 6:1-2. But in that light we are guided towards the glory prepared for us.

2. As with Eucharistic Prayer II, here is an image of all goodness, life, and blessings flowing from God as the final source of Good as water flows from a fountain. Psalm 36, verses 6-11, gives a similar image of God blessing all creatures as a fountain of life and source of all light. See also Prov. 14:27 (describing the fear of the Lord as the font of life.) Some of the prophets and the Book of Revelation also have images of God's purifying water flowing forth from His temple. See Ezek. 47; Joel 4:18; Zech. 13:1; Rev. 22:1; see also John 4:14. (There is in Joel and Baruch a warning against forsaking God, the sole fount of life. See Baruch 3:10-13; Joel 4:18.) The Preface gives a vivid image of the philosophical ideas of God as the pure Spirit sending forth things, as the uncaused cause, as the unmoved mover of all things, etc. Even in the midst of a fallen world, we should not forget this underlying order and beauty. See, e.g., Is. 55:10-12.

3. The preface looks up to the angels praising God in heaven and calls for all on earth to join them in the praise God, saying that as we praise God, we bring all of creation to do so. See Dan. 3:52-90; Rev. 4:6-11, 5:8-14. The psalms frequently call upon the faithful and the angels to join in prayer, drawing us up to the realm of heaven and bringing the order of heaven down to earth. See, e.g., Ps. 29, 103:1-2, 19-22, 148. Part of the idea is that we, who are still entrusted with material creation despite the limitations imposed by the fall, can make creation praise God. And, through the liturgy, and especially through

the Mass, the order of heaven descends to earth and thus enables us to raise this earth to God in prayer.

B. After the Sanctus, the prayer then proceeds onto the first part of the anamnesis, giving a brief summary of salvation history.

1. It begins with again praising God for His greatness and the love that is the basis for all things. The Wisdom literature especially emphasized wisdom as the center of all of creation. See Prov. 8:22-36; Wis. 7:22-8:1. This wisdom can be an image of Jesus Himself, through whom all things were made and Who shows forth the fullness of God. See John 14:9-10; Col. 1:15-20.

2. The prayer then describes the original creation, in which Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, see Gen. 1:26. In that primordial state, they were to have dominion over the earth and even the sky, while themselves serving and worshiping God. The Sabbath day held everything in place; and the Eucharist is now meant to restore that order. The wedding feast of Cana and the multiplication of loaves were both images of the Eucharist and images of the restoration of the natural fruitfulness of creation under the law of God. See John 2:1-12, 6:1-15.

3. The prayer then describes how God reached out, not only to His Chosen People, but to all people. The Book of Wisdom recount how God left the good things of earth as a sign of His goodness, and that even the punishments He inflicted (e.g., example on the Egyptians) were meant to bring them back to His grace. See Wis. 11:15-12:22, 15:1-3.; see also Isaiah 2:18-20; Romans 2:12-16. The covenant offered to Abraham was meant for the blessing of all nations. See Gen. 12:2, Is. 56:6-8; Gal. 3:7-14.

4. The prayer then refers to the covenants that God offered to man as preparations for the final covenant that Jesus gives to us.

- Even after the Fall, God made covenants: (1) with Noah giving him again dominion over the earth, reiterating that he would was still in God's image, and promising never to destroy the earth by flood again, see Gen. 9:1-17; (2) with Abraham, promising him uncountable descendants, a land, and a descendant through whom all nations would be blessed, see Gen. 12:1-2, 15:1-16, 17:1-22; (3) with Moses and the Israelites on Mount Sinai, promising to make them His people and to protect and guide them if they would keep His commandments, see, e.g., Ex. 20-31; Duet. 5-30; and (4) to King David, that his line of kings would last forever, see 2 Sam. 7:8-16.

- The prophets also spoke of a new covenant that God would give to His people, a covenant that would allow His people to fulfill His callings and offer Him fitting worship. Through this final covenant, God would establish His final kingdom. See, e.g., Is. 55:1-3, 59:19-21, 61:4-62:12; Jer. 31:31-40; Ezek. 36:25-32. 37:26-28.

- Jesus established this new covenant by His sacrifice, re-presented at each

Mass. See Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25. This establishment of a new covenant is especially a theme of the letter to the Hebrews. See Heb. 7:22, 8:8, 9:15, 12:24. The new covenant fulfills the old covenants by bringing about God's forgiveness and bringing us into the order of God; by pouring forth blessings upon the world, and especially upon the children of faith, who have the permanent inheritances for which the land was a symbol; by constituting us as God's holy people; and by bringing forth the glory of the kingdom of God.

5. The prayer then recounts the beginning of the fulfillment of this new covenant, referring to John 3:16 in describing the love of God through which He sent His Son to earth. The prayer also emphasizes, as the Gospels according to Luke and Matthew do, that Jesus was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit and was born to be our Savior. See Matt. 1:20-21, Luke 1:35. It then focusing on the fact that Jesus is truly human like us, except without sin. This phrase comes from Hebrews, which says that Jesus especially helps us and sympathizes with us because He struggled as we do. See Hebrews 2:14-18, 4:14-16. Hebrews says that, because Jesus became human, we can now with confidence approach the throne of God, which is what we do at every Mass.

6. Picking up on the prophesy of Isaiah, which Jesus applied to Himself at the synagogue early in His public ministry, the prayer then describes the Gospel of Christ in terms of His saving work in the world for the poor, prisoners, and the sorrowing. This passage reflects the fact that the grace of God can be especially present to those in need. See Luke 4:18-19; Is. 61:1-3.

7. The prayer then proceeds onto His death and resurrection, describing the poetry and balance of Jesus destroying death by dying and restoring life by rising again. This phrase is closest to Hebrews 2:14-15, which describes Jesus' compassion in becoming human like us. See also 1 Cor. 15:50-56. Isaiah likewise invokes this theme of destroying death when he describes the messianic kingdom, of which God's judgment is even now a first promise. See Isaiah 25:1-9.

8. Finally, the Eucharistic Prayer refers to Pentecost and the sending of the Spirit generally as Jesus "first fruits" to believers. See 2 Cor. 1:21-22.

- There is a sense of a harvest of the Spirit of which we experience even now a springtime. The Spirit allows us to rise above selfish desires and be caught up in the glorious work of God. See John 15:26-27; Romans 8:1-17. In Acts, the Spirit consistently allows the faithful to show forth the glory of God. See, e.g., Acts 2, 8:14-17, 10:44-49, 15:8. This praise of the Spirit leads into the epiclesis.

C. The epiclesis continues on with the theme of the Spirit and the covenant.

1. The epiclesis asks that the Spirit sanctify the offerings of bread and wine, making them worthy to become Jesus Himself. As with Eucharistic Prayers II and III, the prayer hints at both the presence of God coming upon the Temple to make it holy, and the Holy Spirit coming upon Mary that she may make Jesus present in the world. See 1 Kings

8:10-12; Ezek. 43:1-9; Luke 1:26-37.

2. The epiclesis then describes the Eucharist both as the “great mystery,” and as the “eternal covenant” that Jesus left us.

- Picking up on the promises made to Noah, Abraham, and King David, see Gen. 9:16, 17:17-19, 2 Samuel 7:8-16, Hebrews ends with a blessing based upon the “eternal covenant” in Jesus’ blood. Heb. 13:20-21; see also Is. 61:8, Jer. 32:40, Ezek. 37:26.

- The covenant of Sinai is not described as an “everlasting one” (except for the offering of bread, see Lev. 24:8), for it would be replaced and fulfilled by the greater covenant won by Jesus Christ. See Jer. 31:32.

- As with the acclamation of faith, a mystery is above ordinary human nature and is often represented by symbols that show forth this power, which can be understood and explained only partially. See, e.g., Dan. 2; Matt. 13:10-11; 1 Cor. 2:1, Eph. 1:7-9, 3:1-13, 5:32; Rev. 17. The symbol (here the Mass as a whole and the bread and wine about to become Jesus) invite us further into the mystery Jesus’ presence among and soon to be in us.

D. Like the Gospel according to John, the Institution Narrative focuses on Jesus’ love for His disciples and His glory.

1. The phrase “having loved those who were His own in the world” comes from the beginning the description of the Last Supper in the Gospel according to John. See John 13:1. It emphasizes that idea that the first Mass and the sacrifice on Calvary were the expression of the love of the Son of God for us.

2. The narrative describes even the death of Christ as showing Jesus’ love and glory. John especially presents Jesus as triumphantly marching to the Cross and being lifted up in glory on the Cross. See John 12:27-28; 13:31-32, 17:1.

3. The prayer also adds that the chalice was “filled with the fruit of the vine.” There is perhaps a reference to the Psalmist’s idea of the wine overflowing, the prophecies of a Messianic kingdom in which wine will be abundant, or the wedding feast of Cana, where the vessels were filled with water than changed to wine. See, e.g., Ps. 23:5, Amos 9:13-15; Joel 4:18; John 2:1-10. See also Zech. 8:12 (describing the vine abundantly producing as one of the signs of the new kingdom.)

E. The anamnesis then resumes with its prayer thanking God for Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, future return in glory. The Eucharist is central in these events, for thought this mystery the past becomes present to us and we are joined in part even now to our glorious future.

1. Like Eucharistic Prayer III, the anamnesis here especially presents the Eucharist as a preparing us for the return of Christ in glory. See John 6:54.

2. Unique among the Eucharistic Prayers, this anamnesis also says that in the Eucharist we recall Christ's "descent among the dead," a teaching that the Apostle's Creed confirms. The Gospel according to Matthew describes the souls of the just released by Christ from a mysterious place to heaven, with many appearing to those on earth. See Matt. 27:52-53.

3. At one level, this reference reflects the fact that the Mass continues the mission of Jesus of uniting the living and the dead. In addition, First Peter describes a certain descent of Christ to preach to certain disobedient spirits "in prison," possibly souls being held in Purgatory because of disobedience, but who still had a desire to repent. 1 Peter 3:19-20. This interpretation would be consistent with the prayer's overall theme of God's desire to save all people

F. The oblation offers the Eucharist back to God "for the salvation of the world," again emphasizing a universality of the Eucharist. There is a tension between a condemnation of the world, in the sense of worldly values, and God's love for the natural goodness in the world. Compare John 1:10, 7:7, 15:18 with John 3:16, 4:22. The oblation also calls for the Eucharist to make us a "living sacrifice of praise," as Romans, Hebrews and First Peter call us to be in joining our lives to that of Christ. See Romans 12:1; Heb. 13:15, 1 Peter 2:5.

G. The intercessions ask for the unity of the Church, for God's grace upon all peoples, for all the dead and for our own entrance into our share of the everlasting kingdom, with the communion of saints.

1. The prayer focuses on unity with the Pope, the bishops and all the clergy. It then focuses upon unity among all "who take part in this offering and all gathered at the Mass. The prayer then expands further to all the faithful and then "to all who seek You with a sincere heart," presumably meaning those who do not know about God in general or about Jesus in particular, but who are pursuing the truth with good faith.

2. There is also a prayer for all people who have died, including those "whose faith You alone have known." There is a notion here that even many non-Christians have a preliminary faith that insofar as they are in some way seeking the truths that will be fulfilled in Christ. See Acts 17:22-31; Romans 2:14-16.

3. The intercessions end with a prayer that we enter into our inheritances in the kingdom that is beyond death and decay, a reference to the promises of Christ that the faithful will receive great inheritances in the final kingdom. See, e.g., Matt 5:5, 25:34; Mark 10:29-30; Luke 19:11-27, Eph. 1:14-18. We are all called to be princes and princesses of a greater kingdom, with the Mass, the Eucharist and all the liturgies helping us to attain this wondrous goal.