

## Catechism on the Liturgy: VII, 5

Once the Lavabo is finished, the priest turns to go back to the center of the altar and bows low to pray the *Suscipe Sancta Trinitas*; the bow tells us of the humbled Savior Who bowed before the disciples in order to wash their feet at the Last Supper. It is also symbolic of His agony in the garden, bent over with the weight of our sins. After some time of prayer, He searched for Sts. Peter, James and John, asking "Could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch ye and pray." (Mt. 26.40-41) For this, the priest interrupts his prayer and turns to the faithful and says *Orate Fratres* (pray brethren) as the exhortation to the apostles in the garden. The *Orate Fratres* is not in the context of the Mass an accusation however, but said with an affectionate compassion.

All through the Offertory, the prayers are especially about the Church Triumphant, but now the priest turns to the Church militant, the *omnes circumstantium* (all those standing present, as the faithful are referred to in the Canon), and asks for their prayers. His calling the faithful *fratres* (brethren) refers to the Church militant as a kind of family.

The response expresses a wish, that their sacrifice be received at the priests' hands for the glory of God and for the benefit of those present, and for the benefit of the whole Church. As he receives their prayers, he turns in a full circle to signify the reception of and then giving of their prayers to God in the sacrifice.

This prayer is said when the presentation and arrangement of the gifts is complete. The nature of the prayer reminds the priest that he is a mediator, and has an exalted role above the laity as he has been chosen by God to be their mediator, keenly representing the One Mediator. Yet the priest asks that the faithful pray for his sacrifice,

which is public self-accusation that he is in great need of humility to do this work. This exalts the faithful, and shows how important their role is in the sacrifice, and for the interior life of their priest.

You may have wondered why the priest starts out praying audibly, then goes back to silence, beginning with this part of the Mass. Only seven times does he speak distinctly from the *Orate Fratres* to his communion, the reason he says these things out loud but briefly is because our Lord spoke out loud but briefly seven times during His passion. As the Passion of the Lord is primary in this part of the Mass, the great medieval commentators on the Liturgy see the Seven Last Words of Christ being expressed liturgically. The Seven Last Words are actually phrases which came out of the silence of the Passion so that all could hear; they are taken from three different gospels.

The first occasion of this silence/audible speech is here at the *Orate Fratres*, which corresponds to the first word, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." (Lk. 23.34) This is in accord with the plea that God would accept our sacrifice.

The second word is "Amen, I say to thee: this day thou shalt be with me in paradise." (Lk. 23.43) This is in harmony with the end of the Secret which is always the phrase "world without end," said or sung distinctly (*per omnia saecula saeculorum*), before beginning the Preface of the Mass, and of the song of the angels singing the Sanctus.

The third word is "Woman, behold thy son. To the disciple, Behold your mother." (Lk. 19. 26-27) This corresponds to third time the priest breaks silence, the *nobis quoque peccatoribus* - "...to us sinners also, Thy servants hoping in the mul-

titude of Thy mercies..." Even in His agony He gives us the gift of His most holy Mother, who intercedes for us that we might receive a multitude of mercies.

The fourth word is "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mk. 15:34), and it corresponds with the *Pater Noster*. As Christ cried out to His Father with great passion, so we cry out to the Father in the words which Jesus taught us.

The fifth word is "I thirst." (Jn. 19:28) This corresponds with the *Pax Domini sit semper vobiscum*. That is, our Lord has a great thirst for souls, for His friends. And He freely grants His peace to any who come to Him with a humbled and contrite heart, i.e., His friends.

The sixth word is "It is consummated." (Jn. 19:30). This is in accord with the singing of the *Agnus Dei*, Who takes away the sins of the world. The consummation of the sacrifice of Christ enables us to have our sins taken away.

The seventh word is "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." (Lk. 23:46). This is in accord with the *Domine non sum dignus*...the death of Christ was caused by our sins, so it is fitting to express our fundamental unworthiness to receive Him as a result. He gives Himself to the Father, and the Father gives Him to us.

I am consistently struck by the depth and intelligence of the Gregorian Rite, and this incorporation of the Seven Last Words, in perfect order with the liturgy, is

just one more example of why this rite is clearly a masterpiece of the Holy Ghost.

After the *Orate Fratres* and its response is finished, the priest prays the Secret in silence. Some authors (such as the excellent Fr. Nicholas Gihl) maintain that it is called the Secret because it is said silently. But this is unlikely since many prayers are said silently, and because at one time it was said out loud so that everyone could hear it. Most likely it is called the Secret because it that it was a prayer said *super secreta* (literally "above that which was set apart," from the Latin *secretus*, a participle of the verb *secernere*, meaning to set apart).

All the Secrets allude to the offerings on the altar to be used in the sacrifice (those particularly on the corporal) and ask that by becoming Christ they may avail for our salvation (*salvare*, to preserve). They speak particularly of oblations, offerings, the *superpositas* – that is collected together, almost heaped up if you will, like the little pile of loaves brought by the faithful in ancient times.

All the Secrets harmonize perfectly with the Collects of the Mass, in regard to their construction, number, succession and concluding form. But they differ in that the Collects ask for some special grace regarding the mystery of the day. But the Secrets are oblation-prayers, which ask that the gifts be blessed, dedicated, sanctified and consecrated; then the graces of the Sacrifice be bestowed on the Church. The Secret always ends with the phrase "world without end."