

Catechism on the Liturgy VII, 6

But if our mind is in heaven in thought, then our hearts should follow, that is, our desires and wants should be directed mainly to the next life. Ordinarily this is very difficult to do, but it should be done at least once a day at Holy Mass. The more estranged the soul becomes from frivolity and the distractions of the world, the more she can lift her mind and heart up to heavenly things.

The gesture of the priest raising his hands at the *sursum corda* reminds us of the invitation of St. Jeremiah the Prophet, "Let us raise our hearts together with our hands to the Lord in heaven." (Lam. 3.4)

At the third versicle the priest enjoins the faithful "Let us give thanks to the Lord God," and at the same time joining his hands before his breast and bowing his shoulders to the crucifix. This reminds him once again (he needs many such reminders) of how dependant he is on the sacrifice of the Cross for the grace to do what he is doing. He would not be giving thanks were it not for the Cross. He needs a noble heart to perform his duty, as do the faithful theirs. Gratitude is the sign of a noble heart, and ingratitude is the mark of a mean soul. Fervent thanksgiving belongs to Christian perfection. The more devout and perfect the soul, the more it will be filled with the spirit of gratitude. The saints, when upon earth, never wearied of thanking God, and unceasing thanksgiving is their blessed occupation in eternity.

Notice that thanksgiving is declared to be just (*justum*), right (*aequum*) and salutary (*salutare*). It is just because gratitude is closely allied to justice, since justice is the

will and endeavor to repay as far as possible, benefits received. It is God's will that we be just. "In all things give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus." (1 Thess. 5.18) It is right to give Him thanks, in the sense of being proper and becoming. After all, the Father is about to give us His only begotten Son. It is salutary, in that it promotes our temporal and eternal welfare. Gratitude opens to us the treasures of divine liberality. Gratitude is supremely profitable to friendship, but ingratitude is like a scorching wind that dries up blessings.

Thomas a Kempis put this succinctly: "The gifts of grace cannot abound or flow in us, because we are ungrateful to the Giver; and because we do not return them all to the fountain-head. For grace will ever be given him who dutifully returns thanks. Be grateful then for the least, and thou shalt be worthy to receive greater things." (Imit. 2.10)

And how far should our thanksgiving go? How often should it be done? *Semper et ubique* as it says in the Preface. Always and everywhere. There is no time or place in which we should not from the fullness of our hearts say "Thanks be to God!"

But we are not equal to the task...we stammer like infants sometimes when we pray, and so we call upon the angels to praise Him properly, and thus we sing the *Sanctus* at the conclusion of the preface – the song of the angels – and the priest prays it bowed low like the angels are bowed.

After the Secret, which is symbolic of the Savior's time in the Garden of Olives, He now begins His way of the Cross in the Preface. During the reception and carrying of His cross, He received shouts of insults and blasphemies. The preface is a reparation for this – the church in our name thanks God for all the mercies we have received. The Preface also corresponds to Christ giving thanks before the first consecration in history, at the Last Supper.

The Roman Canon is one prayer, from the Preface to the *Per Ipsum*. The Preface is a solemn introduction to the Canon. Originally it was left for the celebrant to improvise. But improvisational prayer was eliminated rather quickly from the liturgy for obvious reasons; such as the celebrant saying something stupid, or even heretical. By the third century, there were as many prefaces as there were Masses. That is still the case with the Mozarabic and Ambrosian Rites. Today there are eighteen prefaces used in the 1962 Roman Missal.

The formula for the prefaces is simple:

1. The versicles. These are a short dialogue between celebrant and people, and date from the 2nd century. This calls to mind the ancient Jewish feasts of purifying the Temple: "All the priests made prayer, while the sacrifice was consuming, Jonathan beginning and the rest answering." (2 Mach. 1.23)

2. The motive of our praise is stated, which varies according to the feast. For example, "We give thanks unto thee who dost set the salvation of mankind upon the tree of the Cross, so that whence came death thence also life might rise again..." (Preface of the Passion). "For

thy Son was lifted up into heaven, so that he might make us partakers of his godhead." (Preface of the Ascension)

3. A conclusion invoking the angels who properly glorify God as He should be adored. St. Gregory of Nyssa said the walls are white with angels at the Sacrifice.

The greatest of all the prefaces is the *Exultet*, which is sung only once a year at the Easter Vigil.

We may wonder with the first versicle - the *Dominus Vobiscum* - why the priest does not turn around to face the people. This is because the Preface is the fulfillment of Moses on Mount Sinai, who entered into the holy cloud, and began to commune face-to-face with the Lord. From the *Orate Fratres* to the *Ecce Agnus Dei*, the priest has eyes and mind directed only to the Sacrifice, and the faithful will see his face again only after the marvels of the Consecration and Communion have been completed, like the Hebrews seeing the face of Moses only after the Law had been given.

The imperative *sursum corda* is some rather curious Latin. Literally it means "Hearts up!" or "Hearts on high!" It reminds me of the sergeant giving the order in no uncertain terms, "Right face!" And literally the faithful calmly respond "We have hearts, and they are towards the Lord." This rather odd phrase refers to a certain mood which should begin every prayer according to St. Cyprian - namely that every fleshly and worldly thought should be put aside, and the mind inclined solely to the Lord. Of all the times of the Mass when we should try to close our minds to distractions, this is the time.

