

*'That they all may
be one'*



Aspects of Epiclesis in the Roman Mass

For generations in the Roman Catholic Church the so-called *Roman Rite* held almost universal sway - probably from its beginnings in the early centuries and certainly through to the Second Vatican Council of the nineteen sixties. It was not that there were no other forms: the *Mozarabic*, the *Gallican*, the *Ambrosian* for example, some of which have managed tenuously to survive till our day. But when Latin eventually replaced Greek as the liturgical language of the Church in Rome, and a strong conservatism prevailed, so the form of the mass used in Rome gradually took precedence over other rites in the Western Church

This might seem an odd quirk of history. The old Roman rite is markedly different from the ancient liturgies of the east, and even in many respects from the other western rites we have mentioned. Whereas the latter retained some of the elements of the Eastern tradition, the Church in Rome seems to have deprived itself of much of that richness. No doubt this was partly due to the adoption of Latin, with its concise precision of expression, in contrast with the greater profuseness and poetic style of the Greek liturgical language.

But the differences also marked a growing divergence in theological understanding. Such differences need not, however, make for insuperable barriers now between east and west, despite the polemics of centuries. The recent liturgical and ecumenical movements have given rise to fresh insights and some change of climate. It is actually possible now to look dispassionately at the old Roman rite and to find, not surprisingly, that many of the so-called eastern emphases are not in fact wholly absent. Moreover, the new Eucharistic Prayers in the Roman Catholic Church, stemming from the liturgical renewal of Vatican Council II, consciously restore some of these half-buried insights to something of their full status. This is especially true of the *epiclesis* - the invocation in the Eucharist of the Holy Spirit upon the gifts and on the faithful.

The *epiclesis* has been felt to be absent from the old Latin rite. Admittedly it is obviously **not** there in its full glory or its theological depth, as Orthodox Christians understand it. The placing of what could be its traces is, for a start, different, some aspects appearing before and only some after the words of institution, - ie “This is my body . . . This is my blood” etc. Yet surely the *epiclesis* is hinted at, and has possibly ‘got lost on the way’.

The history of the development of the rite is both complex and obscure. In the form in which it reached us latterly, up till the reform of Vatican Council II, there was a fairly elaborate Offertory rite. At one point, before the censing of the altar, the washing of hands and the Preface, the celebrant clearly invokes the Holy Spirit and blesses the bread and wine with these words:

Come, Almighty Sanctifier and Everliving God, and bless this sacrifice prepared for the glory of your holy name. (Veni Sanctificator)

It is natural to see this as at least a vestige of an *epiclesis*, and no doubt it is. Modern liturgical scholars, however, recognise the prayer to be a later accretion to the old Latin rite derived from Gallican sources. But at least it **was** allowed its place in the authorised Latin mass over several centuries.

Turning now to the *Canon* - the actual Eucharistic Prayer - we do in fact find what might well be a trace of an *epiclesis*, at least over the gifts and though it is placed before rather than after the words of institution. In the *Quam oblationem* prayer the celebrating priest says:

Be pleased, O God, to bless this offering, to accept it fully, to make it perfect and worthy to please you, so that it may become for us the Body and Blood of your dearly beloved Son . .

Although the Holy Spirit is not specifically mentioned surely the implication is there?

Then, **after** the words of institution and the *anamnesis* - or calling to mind of the mysteries of our redemption - when in the Eastern tradition we find the full *epiclesis*, on the gifts **and** on the people, in the Roman rite there is at least a suggestion of prayer for the blessing of the Holy Spirit. The instance occurs in the *supplices te rogamus*, a prayer dating from the earliest times, which pleads that God’s holy angel should take the sanctified gifts to the heavenly altar. And why? “that all who are partakers at the altar of the precious Body and Blood of your - ie God

the Father's - Son may be filled with all heavenly grace and blessing". What *is* that grace and blessing but the Holy Spirit himself, sent down by the risen and glorified Christ from the Father? We could claim, then, that the second aspect of the *epiclesis* is not wholly absent from the rite. Western Catholic believers have not been deprived of the Spirit's blessing for all these centuries, surely.

Admittedly the Holy Spirit is rarely invoked personally in the Roman rite, unlike the wealth of references in the Eastern liturgies from start to finish. It is an impoverishment and one now recognised in the Roman Catholic Church itself. Pope John XXIII is reported to have said, not long before his death, that a renewed teaching on the Holy Spirit was vitally needed among Catholics. This has indeed been happening since then. The Mass itself is being seen again, at least in some quarters, as a renewal of Pentecost. The worshippers as well as the sacred gifts are recognised as being 'changed' because of the power of the Holy Spirit descending upon them.

This insight comes not from theological text-books or simply from individual prayer-experience, but is rather a direct outflow from the revised Eucharistic Prayers in the new Roman Mass - *Missa Normativa*, - the new Roman rite. To these we now turn.

The Offertory rite is much curtailed, sadly perhaps, so we lose the splendid prayer to the Almighty Sanctifier. The first of the four Eucharistic Prayers is substantially the same as the original Latin Roman rite. The *Quam oblationem* prayer directly before the words of institution, as commented on above, is modified to give a slightly stronger allusion to the action of the Holy Spirit. The celebrant prays:

*Bless and approve our offering;
make it acceptable to you,
an offering **in spirit** and in truth.
Let it become for us
the body and blood
of Jesus Christ, your only Son our Lord.*

The former prayer, concerning the altar on high, *supplices te Rogamus*, coming shortly after the *anamnesis*, is retained but in simplified form. The celebrant asks that those communicating should be "filled with every grace and blessing". Unfortunately the omission of the word

'heavenly' before 'grace' detracts slightly from the sensed reference to the Holy Spirit, (see above).

With the other Eucharistic Prayers we fare better, however. A conscious attempt is made to incorporate the *epiclesis*, though it still appears in a split form, ie in two parts before and after the words of institution, unlike the finalised position in the East, which has a twofold, combined *epiclesis* afterwards - deeply symbolic as this is of the renewal of Pentecost.

To illustrate. In the Second Eucharistic Prayer the priest prays:

*Let your spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy,
so that they may become for us
the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ.*

and later, *after* the words of institution etc "May all of us who share in the body and blood of Christ be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit". The same Spirit has also had honourable mention in the Preface where we are reminded that Jesus took flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Third Eucharistic Prayer is slightly richer in references. Before the Institution, in a prayer addressed to the Father, we meet: "All life, all holiness comes from you through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord *by the working of the Holy Spirit. . .*", and shortly afterwards there follows a direct *epiclesis*, over the gifts: "And so, Father, we bring you these gifts. We ask you to make them holy by the power of your Spirit, that they may become the body and blood of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. . . ." Then, in the later place, comes the prayer for the blessing of the people: "Grant that we, who are nourished by his body and blood, may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ".

The final Eucharistic Prayer, number four, has similar references: firstly, in the Preface, there is a reminder of the overshadowing of Mary at the Annunciation and a little later of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. Almost at once after that there is a brief *epiclesis* over the gifts: "Father, may this Holy Spirit sanctify these offerings, Let them become the body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord". (One is saddened by the brevity and sparseness of the wording it must be admitted). Then, later, after the *anamnesis* comes the second part, the blessing of

the people: “Father. . . by your Holy Spirit, gather all who share this one bread and one cup into the one body of Christ, a living sacrifice of praise”.

All of this is good and positive, steps in the right direction. There is a sense of incompleteness, however, of a process which will perhaps only reach its full term as the Spirit himself answers our prayer of invocation. As priest and people alike are imbued by the Spirit, eucharist by eucharist, and made one by the hallowed gifts, so the awkwardness in the terminology will naturally disappear. Other and richer Eucharistic Prayers will be introduced more cognisant of the fulness of the tradition . . . more fully graced by the power of the Spirit from start to finish and surely in language a little more worthy of so immeasurable a mystery.

*Laud, O Sion, thy salvation,
Laud with hymns of exultation
Christ, thy King and Shepherd true:
Spend thyself, his honour raising,
Who surpasseth all thy praising;
Never canst thou reach his due. . . .*

*Yea, beneath these signs are hidden
Glorious things to sight forbidden:
Look not on the outward sign.
Wine is poured and Bread is broken,
But in either sacred token
Christ is here BY POWER DIVINE.*

Saint Thomas Aquinas.