

Lesson Five: Heaven On Earth: The Liturgy of the Eucharist

I. The Bible in Action

A. Lift Up Your Hearts

"Lift up your hearts!"

We hear these words at the high point of the Mass, at the start of the Eucharistic prayer.

In Scripture, the exhortation to "lift up" is often associated with offering one's self to God through prayer (see [Psalm 25:1-2](#); [Psalm 134:2](#)).

In the one place where the specific expression, "lift up your hearts," is used, it is part of a cry for God's mercy and presence, and a vow to return to Him and serve Him (see [Lamentations 3:41](#); [Lamentations 2:19](#)).

And the exhortation to "lift up your hearts" may well have been a part of the original celebration of the Eucharist.

But when we lift up our hearts in the Eucharist, there is a certain "realism" about it. It's not just a figure of speech. Our hearts are really going somewhere. We are lifting our hearts to heaven, joining our prayers of thanks and praise to those of the angels in heaven.

Our feet may still be planted on the ground in an ordinary parish church. But in the Mass, we enter heaven itself. We take our place in the ceaseless worship of the angels and the saints in heaven. Our liturgy on earth is part of the eternal heavenly liturgy. The Mass, in other words, is heaven on earth.

But before we go to heaven, we should review how the Mass has led us to this point.

B. The Bible Ends in the Mass

Thus far in our study, we've seen how the Bible and the Mass were made for each other. The "destination" that all of Scripture points to is the Mass. And the Mass is the Bible in action - right before our eyes the Scripture's saving truths are "actualized," made actual or real.

As we've seen, much of the prayer and worship of the Mass is taken directly from Scripture or is meant to evoke for us the events of salvation history recorded in Scripture.

Of course, in the Liturgy of the Word we actually hear the Word of God in Scripture. In fact, as we have seen, the Mass is the native environment of Scripture. The official "canon" of Scripture is first and foremost the list of books deemed by early Church authorities, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to be suitable for public reading in the liturgy.

When the Scriptures are read in church, God himself speaks to us and Christ is present. And He tells us, through the Sunday readings, how God's plan for our salvation has played out in history, leading us to the Eucharistic table.

Following the Word of God, we profess our faith "with one voice" in the words of the Creed.

Again, there is a biblical "precedent" for this practice of the Mass. In the Old Testament, the reading of Scripture is often followed by a profession of faith. Indeed, when God speaks, His Word requires an answer. The answer God desires is our vow of faith and obedience.

When Moses gave the Law to the Israelites, it was expected that they would answer. And they responded, "We will do everything that the Lord has told us" (see [Exodus 24:3](#)).

When priests rediscovered the book of the Law in the reign of Josiah, the king had it read in the presence of the people. Again we see that the reading of the Scriptures was understood to be a call to the people - a call that requires their response. That's why, after hearing the Word, the king made a covenant with God on behalf of the people, committing them to "keep His commandments, decrees, and statutes, with his whole heart and soul" (see [2 Chronicles 34:29-32](#); Nehemiah 9).

C. What We Believe

We do the same thing in the Mass. We hear the Word of God – spoken to us in our midst by Christ – and we respond to the story of salvation we hear in the readings from the Old and New Testaments. And that response takes the form of reciting of the Creed.

It is not just a rote recitation of articles of faith. When we say, "We believe . . ." we're saying what the Israelites said, and what King Josiah said – that we're ready to keep God's commands, to live in a way that's worthy of the words we've heard in the Scripture readings of the Mass.

Something else, too, about the Creed: Notice that it's an outline of the biblical story. In the Creed we repeat the history of our salvation - from the creation of heaven and earth through the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Ascension, right to the Last Judgment at the end of time.

And almost every word of the Creed we profess is drawn from Scripture - we profess our faith in the God revealed in Scripture, using the very words of Scripture.

To take just a few examples:

- We believe in "one God, the father" (see [1 Corinthians 8:6](#); [Ephesians 4:6](#)); and in His "only Son" (see [John 3:16](#)); through whom all things were made (see [Colossians 1:16](#)).
- "For our sake" He was crucified (see [2 Corinthians 5:21](#)); and He will one day come again to "judge the living and the dead" (see [Acts 10:42](#)), and His kingdom will have "no end" (see [Luke 1:33](#)).
- We believe in "one baptism" (see [Ephesians 4:5](#)) and the life of the world to come (see [John 6:51](#)).

After our profession of faith, we pray for one another and for those in need, another practice of the Mass that follows the example of the New Testament (see [James 5:16](#); [1 Thessalonians 1:2](#); [Colossians 1:9](#)).

II. The Liturgy in Heaven

A. Caught Up in the Spirit

The biblical story – told to us in the Scripture readings for the Mass and summarized in the Creed – reaches its "goal" in the Mass.

All the history recorded in Scripture, all that it reveals about the "one God" and His only Son, was intended to lead us to the moment of communion with God, through "the breaking of the bread" (see [Luke 24:35](#)).

In the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we see the culmination of biblical history right in front of us on the altar.

We "lift up our hearts" to heaven and are, in a real sense, "caught up in spirit" and taken into a liturgy that's always going on in heaven (see [Revelation 4:2](#)).

That's what was revealed to the Apostle John in the Bible's last book. In fact, it's the Mass that makes sense of the puzzling, and often frightening visions and symbols of Revelation.

What's revealed to John is that the Mass we celebrate on earth is a participation in the liturgy of heaven.

John's vision begins on "the Lord's day," Sunday (see [Revelation 1:10](#)) - the name the first Christians gave to the first day of the week, upon which they celebrated "the breaking of the bread" (see [Acts 20:7](#)).

John is "caught up in spirit on the Lord's Day." In other words, possibly while celebrating the Eucharist himself, John is taken to heaven.

And John sees the same things we see when we come to Mass.

He sees an altar (see [Revelation 8:3](#)); candles (1:12); incense (5:8); priests dressed in robes (4:4). And he sees bread or manna (2:17), and bowls or chalices of blood (see Revelation 16).

He sees heavenly worshippers – angels and saints – crying, "Holy, Holy, Holy" (4:8), singing a hymn to the glory of God, the heavenly king (15:3-4) and shouting "alleluia" (19:1,3,6) and making the sign of the cross on their foreheads (14:1).

There are readings from Scripture (Revelation 2-3), and, finally, the "wedding feast of the Lamb" (19:9).

B. The Mass Revealed in Revelation

In fact, there are many more similarities between the Book of Revelation and the Mass.

Notice that the book itself is written with the intention that it will be read during the liturgy (see [Revelation 1:3](#)). And the book is divided into two parts that roughly correspond to the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist in today's Mass.

The first eleven chapters are concerned with the reading of letters, to be written on a scroll by John who "gives witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ by reporting what he saw" at the dictation of "one like a son of man" (see [Revelation 1: 2,11-13](#)).

The "one like a son of man" is Jesus Christ, who often referred to himself as "Son of Man" (see, [Matthew 25:31](#), [Mark 8:31](#), [Luke 12:8](#), [John 3:13](#)). That image, in turn, takes us back to the vision of Daniel, in which "One like a son of man" comes in glory on the clouds and receives "an everlasting dominion" from God (see [Daniel 7:13-14](#)).

But Revelation also identifies Jesus by name: "the name by which He is called is the Word of God" (see [Revelation 19:13](#)).

John is the human author of this Scripture. But the Scripture has a divine author, too, the Word of God.

Significantly, the first three chapters of Revelation begin the book as the Mass begins, with a sort of Penitential Rite. Jesus uses the word "repent" eight times during his seven letters (see [Revelation 2:16](#)).

And when the Word of God has been proclaimed, the Son declares: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, (then) I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with Me" (see [Revelation 3:20](#)).

With this invitation to dine with Christ himself, the heavenly Liturgy of the Word gives way to the feast of the heavenly Eucharist.

As in our Mass, the "liturgy of the Word" in Revelation prepares us to receive the Lamb of God. All who have "ears to hear" are told that Jesus himself will give them "hidden manna."

This is a reference to the "heavenly bread" that God gave Israel to eat on their Exodus journey (see [Psalm 78:23-25](#)). But this heavenly bread was a sign of the bread that Christ came to give – His own body, given for the life of the world (see [John 6:32-33; 49-51](#)).

This is the daily bread that He taught His disciples to pray for - in a prayer that we pray in every Mass and which we will consider in depth in our next lesson.

Revelation's second half begins in Chapter 11, with the opening of God's temple in heaven, and culminates in the pouring of the seven chalices and the marriage supper of the Lamb – a striking image of the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

III. Worship in the New Jerusalem

A. With the Angels and Saints

John is invited to "come up here" (see [Revelation 4:1](#)). And we are invited to come up to heaven, as well – to lift up our hearts - at the beginning of our Liturgy of the Eucharist.

When we lift up our hearts, we are asked to sing with the angels and saints.

This is not simply a fine expression of sentiment. As with everything else in the Mass, there is a "sacramental realism" at work here.

At this point in the Mass, we are in a mysterious way joining our song to the song that John – and the prophet Isaiah before him – heard in heaven: "Holy, holy, holy . . ." (see [Revelation 4:8; Isaiah 6:3](#)).

The second part of our song ("Blessed is he . . .") is taken from the Psalm that pilgrims to Jerusalem would sing at Passover. It was also the psalm that was sung upon Christ's triumphal entry to Jerusalem (see [Mark 11:10](#); [Psalm 118:26](#)).

The biblical words give us clues to what's going on in the Mass. We have gathered around the altar – not only an earthly altar, but a heavenly altar as well. We have made our way to Mount Zion, the new and heavenly Jerusalem.

This is what John saw – "the Lamb standing on Mount Zion "(see [Revelation 14:1](#)).

The Letter to the Hebrews (see [Hebrews 12:22-24](#)) likewise speaks of the Eucharistic celebration on earth as entrance into and participation in the heavenly liturgy in the new Jerusalem.

In the Mass, says Hebrews, we approach "Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." There, we join "countless angels" and "the assembly of the firstborn" and Jesus, "mediator of the new covenant and the sprinkled blood" in a "festal gathering" or feast.

These lines are filled with biblical allusions and references. It is interesting to note that the word translated "assembly" is the Greek word *ekklesia* – the word for "church."

And notice the similarities between Hebrews' description of the Mass and John's Revelation. Both see a new Jerusalem, a new Zion, the dwelling place of the Lord (see [Psalm 132:13-14](#)). Both see angels and Jesus, the Lamb whose blood takes away the sin of the world. And both see a "feast" and a gathering of "firstborn" or "first fruits" of those who believe in Jesus (see [Revelation 14:4](#)). And both see this feast in the temple of heaven, a sign of the new covenant wrought in the blood of Jesus (see [Revelation 11:19](#))

What these Scriptures show us is that the Mass is the summit of salvation history told in Scripture.

And this is the same thing that the prayers of the Mass tell us.

B. Praying Salvation History

The Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass is a prayer of thanksgiving in which the gifts we offer at the altar - bread and wine, and all the works of our hands and minds - are sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As with everything else in the Mass, these are biblical prayers, employing language found in the Scriptures, and also "summarizing" the biblical story (to read them, see Eucharistic Prayers).

But they are much more than that. The Eucharistic prayers retell salvation history, but they also make us a part of that history, through the sacramental change of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood.

The various prefaces to the Eucharistic prayers recall for us the entire biblical story, showing us always how the whole plan of salvation recorded in the Bible reached its summit in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which we commemorate in the Mass.

"We see your infinite power in your loving plan of salvation," we pray in Preface of Sundays in Ordinary Time III, one of several preface options for Masses celebrated outside of special seasons such as Lent, Easter, Advent, and Christmas.

This preface sketches God's loving plan, giving us in two short lines a summary of the entire Bible: "Man refused your friendship, but man himself was to restore it through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Another preface heard on ordinary Sundays, Preface of Sundays in Ordinary Time VIII, also gives us a summary of salvation history, showing us how all the history of Scripture was meant to culminate in the Church and the liturgy:

When your children sinned
and wandered far from your friendship,
you reunited them with yourself
through the blood of your Son
and the power of the Holy Spirit.
You gather them into your Church . . .
call them to be your people . . .
make them the body of Christ
and the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit.

Eucharistic Prayer IV provides an entire history of the world – beginning with God's forming of men and women in his own likeness and their loss of his friendship through disobedience. The prayer continues to outline Old Testament history - God's offering of covenants to mankind to help "all men seek and find" Him; the promise of salvation delivered through the prophets. "In the fullness of time," the prayer declares, God sent His only Son.

The climax of the salvation history told in the Eucharistic Prayers – as in the Bible – is the Last Supper.

C. In Remembrance of Him

As we noted in our first lesson, the words of "institution" in the Eucharistic Prayer are taken directly from the biblical accounts of the Last Supper, as recalled also by St. Paul (see [1 Corinthians 11:23-29](#); [Matthew 26:26-29](#); [Mark 14:22-25](#); [Luke 22:15-20](#)).

And the Church, in the Eucharist, fulfills Christ's command, recorded in the Scriptures: "Do this in remembrance of Me."

At this point in the Eucharistic Prayer, it is significant that the priest uses the exact words of Scripture: "This is My body . . ." and "This is the cup of My blood . . ."

Why is this significant? Because, as we pointed out in our first lesson, only the Word of God can "do" what Jesus has asked - transform bread and wine into His body and blood. Our worship can be life-transforming because the biblical Word we hear is "not a human word but . . . truly is the Word of God" (see [1 Thessalonians 2:13](#)).

Only the Word of God has the power to deliver what it promises, it's power to bring us into communion with the true and living presence of Jesus. Only the sacred speech of God can perform the divine action of transforming bread and wine into the Body and Blood of our Lord. Only the sacred speech of God can bring us into communion with the living God.

And in the Mass, we respond to this great mystery of our faith in words also drawn from Scripture. The memorial acclamations ("Christ has died . . .") are also biblical prayers. With Paul, we affirm that when we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim His death until He comes (see [1 Corinthians 11:26](#)). We also affirm that by dying and rising, He destroyed death (see [1 Corinthians 15:26](#)) and that He will come again (see [John 14:3](#)). He is indeed, the savior of the world (see [John 4:42](#); [1 John 4:14](#)).

IV. Study Questions

1. Name two or three examples of how the Creed we profess at Mass quotes or evokes the Bible.
2. What is the biblical "precedent" for making a confession of faith following the hearing of God's word?
3. When we "lift up our hearts" in the Mass, where are lifting them up to?
4. Name some examples of how the Book of Revelation reveals the heavenly liturgy?
5. How do the Eucharistic Prayers and their prefaces function in the Mass?
6. What is the summit of salvation history, as that history is recounted and summarized in the Eucharistic Prayers?

For prayer and reflection:

Do we listen intently to the words of the Mass? Do we hear the story of our own sin and redemption in the preface? Do we remember the story of our salvation in the Eucharistic prayer?