

## **O COME, LET US WORSHIP XIII: “LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS”**

It is a long time coming, the high point and core of the Mass. We have carefully prepared heart and mind through quiet meditation, the rites of entrance, the Liturgy of the Word, the Offertory and preparation of the Altar, the Prayer for the Church, the Confession of Sin and the Absolution—and then, after the Comfortable Words of our Lord and his apostles, the priest says yet once more, “The Lord be with you” and the people respond, and then with a sober joy he bids them, “Lift up your hearts.” The words are most striking following as they do the words of forgiveness, ending with those of blessed Saint John who assures us that if anyone sins—*when* each of us does in fact sin—we have an advocate, a defense lawyer, who pleads our case, Jesus Christ the righteous, who is himself the propitiation, the expiation, of our sins. Is this message not reason enough for us to lift up our hearts? But this is only the proximate cause for our thanksgiving. The words and action that follow show us that it is into the very innermost mystery of our faith that we are about to peer and that is the truest, deepest, most ultimate cause for us to give God thanks and praise.

“Lift up your hearts.” The words echo those of St. Paul to the Colossians, where in the light of Christ’s resurrection and ours in him we are urged to lift our hearts and minds on high where Christ, having finished the work of our redemption, is seated at the right hand of God. That is where our affections must ultimately be fixed and not on the things of the earth (Col. 3:1-4).

“Lift up your hearts.” The words come to us from the very early Church. The oldest record we have of the precise words of the Church’s liturgy is found in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus of Rome. There we read at the beginning of the Eucharistic canon,

“He [the bishop who is presiding] is to say:

--The Lord be with you.

(All respond:)

And with thy spirit!

--Let us lift up our hearts.

They are turned to the Lord.

--Let us give thanks to the Lord!

It is right and just.

The words were fixed within the first two centuries of the Church's existence and have come down to us virtually unchanged. They could hardly be improved upon. The formality of the exchange between priest and people and the manner in which each echoes and reinforces the other underscore the solemnity and meaning--that plus the gradual raising of the priest's hands and arms. We are approaching the Holy of Holies, and in the light of this greatest and most divine of mysteries we lift our hearts on high.

In the next words, "Let us give thanks to the lord our God," we are not simply bidden, as elsewhere, to pray, to offer an *oratio*, we are bidden to *give thanks*, to offer a *εὐχαριστία*, and here is a word of such significance that it is by it that the rite is known: the Eucharist, the Thanksgiving. To that bidding the people respond, "It is meet and right so to do." The priest then answers and echoes the words of the people, "It is very meet, right and our bounden duty" always and everywhere to give thanks to God. In this thanksgiving that is hereby acknowledged as most appropriate and right we touch on that which is our highest end, the greatest and final goal of human existence. When our brief lives are over and the last page of history turned, this will be our eternal occupation: to give thanks and praise to the Lord our God. Only then will we fully understand why it is meet and right so to do. Only then will we understand the fullness of God's love and the grandeur of his redemptive work for us through Jesus Christ his Son. The high point in the liturgy of the Mass at which we now arrive is an anticipation and foretaste of that our final blessedness.

Following this dialogue between the priest and people the ancient liturgies proceeded to outline the reasons for our thanks and praise, beginning with the wonder of God's creation and kind providence through his mercy shown in the sending of his Son for our redemption and the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church for our sanctification, in short, all of the mercies we sum up in the Apostles' Creed. As the Church Year began to develop with a different aspect of redemption in focus in each season there evolved in the place of this long prefatory prayer citing the whole story of our redemption, a shorter

prayer for each season with its own appropriate focus. These are called the Proper Prefaces. The proper preface for Christmas expresses thanks “Because thou didst give Jesus Christ, thine only Son, to be born as at this time for us. . . .” That for Easter says, “But chiefly are we bound to praise thee for the glorious Resurrection of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord, . . . .” And that for Pentecost gives thanks “Through Jesus Christ our Lord, according to whose most true promise, the Holy Ghost came down from heaven . . . .”

After the manifold reasons for our thanksgiving, our Eucharist, are given in the Proper Prefaces, the priests alludes to the company of angels and archangels and all the host of heaven that join us in the praise of our thrice-holy God. Do not ever think that what we do as a congregation gathered within these four walls is an obscure, isolated, hidden-away kind of thing. As we approach the contemplation of the holy mystery we are joined by the unseen multitude of heavenly beings the whole purpose of whose existence is the worship of him whom we now praise. And it is not so much that they join us as that we, as though transported to realms above, join them, uniting our voices with theirs singing, *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus*.

And here the curtains are opened upon the scene of heavenly worship of which Holy Scripture speaks on but two occasions. For the first we look back to the prophet Isaiah (6:1 ff.) who in the year of king Uzziah’s death had a vision in the temple of God enthroned in glory with seraphim and cherubim covering their faces in awe and singing antiphonally, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts. Heaven and earth are full of his glory.” The cherubim, you may recall, were enthroned above the mercy seat which covered the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies, to which place Isaiah, not being the high priest, would never have been admitted. On seeing this vision, the prophet cried out, “Woe is me, for I am a sinner and I live among sinners.” For the second picture of heavenly worship we look forward to the scene described for us by St. John in his vision in the Book of the Revelation. The scene is in heaven where there is no longer a temple for the dwelling place of God is with men (Rev. 21:3, 22), but there again the heavenly creatures cry out, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty, which was and is and is to come” (4:8).

The Church of Jesus Christ stands between Isaiah's vision in the temple and St. John's picture of the hereafter, and in the Sanctus we echo the one and anticipate the other. At this most sacred moment it is as though the world and its history disappears or rather that it appears in its ultimate light. The holy, holy, holy God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost is the whence from which we come, the whither toward which we go and the innermost reality of the days between. Here at last and here only do we see all things in their proper perspective. We cannot sustain the vision. It is not for us to hold and handle. It cannot be packaged and stored away for a rainy day. It is a vision for us to renew every time we truly celebrate this Holy Eucharist.

And so we have lifted up our hearts. We have confessed that it is meet and right to render unto God thanks and praise. We have reviewed an aspect of his redemption in the Proper Preface, and we have joined with angels and archangels in singing the great *Trisagion*:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts,  
Heaven and earth are full of thy glory:  
Glory be to thee, O Lord most high.

Yet one short chant remains before the actual consecration of the body and blood of Christ and that is the *Benedictus*: "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest." The words were first sung by the crowds on Palm Sunday as our Lord rode that lowly donkey into the city that was to see him die. "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." The one whom the crowds welcomed into Jerusalem on that day, we do just as surely welcome into our midst in this holy sacrament, but now he comes not to die, but because he has died and is risen from the dead, and he comes to feed us with the blessed sacrament of his body and blood that in his strength and with his love we might live to serve him in this world until the day we are caught up to be with him and to join that heavenly choir singing, "Holy, Holy. Holy" and "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing" (Rev. 5:12).

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