

Mass Parts 31/52: *Moment of Consecration*



In the middle of the 20th century, a French Dominican theologian, Yves Congar, wrote a massive book on the Holy Spirit. In it, he reflects on the difference in liturgical theology between the Roman Catholic and the Greek Orthodox Churches. One point where they diverge is on the exact moment in the Mass when the bread and wine is changed into the Body and Blood. The Orthodox Church sees it as during the Epiclesis, when the Holy Spirit is called down upon the gifts. The Catholic Church focuses in on the Words of Institution, when the priest recites the words of Jesus at the Last Supper: “This is my body...” It is this exact moment of consecration about which we are talking. The bells ring to signal that this has just happened: what we are now looking at raised up above the altar is no longer natural elements, but a supernatural sacrament.

St. Augustine discusses this in more detail, focusing on the Words of Consecration: “This is my body.” Has it become the Eucharist when pronouncing “this”? or is it as he says “body”? What about halfway through the word: “bod” and then “y”? The debate about the “moment” of consecration reached a peak in the late 13th century. What happened if too many people came to Mass and not enough hosts were consecrated? What is the minimum that the priest would have to do to consecrate more? What if the priest had a heart attack halfway through Mass, can another priest finish it? What was certain was that theologians wanted to avoid any talk of a “gradual” change. It is never that we have something that is a “little bit” Jesus and a “little bit” bread. It changes in an instant, but at what instant? While it may seem silly, the debate revolved more around trying to explain “transubstantiation” and the Real Presence. After pronouncing the Words of Consecration, the priest genuflects in adoration to the Eucharist now on the altar, before elevating it for the congregation to see and adore. Think of the older tradition of saying “My Lord and My God” at this moment. Our liturgy informs our theology.

Similar to this was my own experience at going to ordinations. There is a long prayer for ordination and there are many symbols at the Mass: including the anointing of hands and handing over the chalice and paten. But the exact moment of ordination is when the bishop places his hands on the man’s head. I loved to watch the bishop approach each man, and think: “not yet...not yet...not yet.” Only when the hands finally made contact was he now a priest. My ordination classmate, Fr. Zachary Coulter, was ordained about 25 seconds before me. Bishop Murry laid hands on Fr. Coulter, and I thought, “He’s a priest now, but not me yet.” As the bishop approached me, I kept thinking to myself: “not yet...not yet...not yet.” And then after all those years of formation and study, I felt his touch and that was the exact moment.

While the debate on the “moment” of consecration goes back to about the year 300; and while this may be fun for theology, don’t get too caught up in it. Is the Orthodox theology or the Catholic theology correct? The bell can also be rung during the Epiclesis. But then there are two Epiclesis’s in the Eucharistic Prayer . . . The best answer is: just go to Mass. Attend the whole thing and be caught up in the Spirit. All the readings, all the prayers, all the symbols, and all the actions are there to feed us and help us better understand what the Eucharist is and what it means for our lives. And this cannot be limited to a single moment, but for a whole lifetime.

-Fr. Kopp

Next Week: Mystery of Faith