

## An Instructed Eucharist

An examination of the “spiritual technology” of the Holy Eucharist

G. Miles Smith+

11.08.18

*It can be hardest to actually see what is the most familiar.* This is so true of our liturgy of worship once it has become familiar. And yet to see the familiar with new eyes can be very helpful. The Eucharist is actually a highly sophisticated, deliberate form of *spiritual technology* that has evolved over two millennia for the purpose of cultivating and guiding our devotion to God and shaping our souls. The purpose of this Instructed Eucharist is to hopefully give us new eyes to see the familiar.

*What will follow* are points of commentary on the two main parts of the Eucharist: The Liturgy of the Word (p.2) and The Liturgy of the Table (p.5). The Entrance Rite that precedes them also deserves attention. At the end is an Addendum (p.10) on a pastoral matter of frequent importance.

*You can use this document as you need.* One approach would be to *zero in* on parts of the Eucharist that you especially want to read about. These parts are highlighted in **bold print** throughout the document and follow in the sequence that they occur in the Eucharist. Another approach might be to *cut right to the end*—to the Addendum—and get to the pastoral matter addressed there. The addendum may clarify that the point of this whole document is not an abstract intellectual exercise—it is about a spiritual technology that is about real life and the real God. Lastly, another approach you might take to this document would be to continue *reading straight through*, from beginning to end.

## The Entrance Rite

**Transitioning into sacred space** takes some time—because sacred space is also *mental space*. This mental space is where the heart may bring the mind and the body together before God. We need time to prepare ourselves for such a gathering. We get to do that together as a community: as you enter your pew, sitting, perhaps kneeling, perhaps crossing yourself, perhaps praying, and very likely gazing at the altar and the stained glass. The **Organ Prelude** helps with this transition time.

The **Procession** of the clergy and worship assistants into the church is a practice that began in the fourth century—to help people transition into sacred space. The main idea of the processional in the early years of the Church was also for the deacon to carry in the book of the Gospels. The procession is not supposed to be “pomp and circumstance” but a practice of transition with a deliberate focus on Christ.

The first words typically spoken in the Eucharist are called the **Opening Acclamation** and most of the year it begins like this: “*Blessed be God...*” This acclamation is reminiscent of the Jewish way of praying—recalling our spiritual family of origin. And then the acclamation continues on with the distinctively Christian Trinitarian naming of God. Christian worship begins and ends with the Trinity, the dynamic relationship of love between God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in which we may “live, move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

The **Collect for Purity**, as it is usually called, (“*Almighty God, to you all hearts are open...*”) dates from the first English prayer book of 1549. It is quintessentially Anglican and Episcopal. It reminds us that our lives are totally transparent to God. And so, it is most helpful that we come to worship as

*we really are*, setting aside any illusions that we are either totally depraved, totally good, or that we fully know ourselves. We come into the presence of God who knows us completely. “*Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts*” speaks to the ancient understanding that the spiritual heart is a real part of us that is able to perceive God (Jesus: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”). We may “see” God with our hearts, bringing our minds and bodies together in God. So we pray that our hearts may be open and clear for God in this Eucharist so that we may experience God—and not just mirroring our own thinking and obsessions back to ourselves.

Just as does all the instrumental music, the **Hymns** and **Choral Music** also invites our hearts to open to God. Now some people most of the time and all people some of the time, need some quietness that is gently held—as it can be gently held in church—for their hearts to open to God. Music is also very helpful. In fact, historically, the Church has done much to cultivate both the art of reverent quietness and the art of music. Creative quietness is much more than the absence of words—it can be an open space for the unexpected to emerge within us from beyond—or at the least, a little respite from our busy-ness. Music—even with words—is always more than words. The movement of music, at its best, does something almost inexplicable within us, like creative quietness. Sometimes all we can manage to say about music that opens our heart is something like: “Hey, I really liked that...” We know what you mean. The possibility of being so surprised and so moved by music or creative silence—this is so important for our hearts to open to God.

The words of the **Glory to God in the Highest**, usually sung, date from at least the 4<sup>th</sup> century and deliberately reminds us of the song of the angels at the Nativity of Christ (Luke 2). It is a little taste of *Christmas* right at the beginning of the Eucharist, almost every Sunday.

The **Salutation** preceding the prayer, i.e. the exchange between the priest and the congregation that begins with “*The Lord be with you...*”, has long served as a call to *attention*--just in case you already need a wake-up call! The salutation happens *twice* in the service, at the beginning of the two major parts of the service, reminding us of their importance: (1) The Liturgy of the Word and (2) at The Liturgy of the Table.

Even though the prayer immediately following the salutation, called the **Collect of the Day**, immediately precedes the reading of scripture, you may have noticed that it is not necessarily related to any of the scripture themes of the day but often moves through other Christian themes each Sunday. This prayer is called a “collect” because it seeks to *collect* our thoughts toward God. The collect uses a very simple structure for prayer that can be a good school for learning how to pray on your own. This collect concludes the entrance rite of Holy Eucharist. We are now hopefully ready for the first main part service.

## The Liturgy of the Word

While scripture is woven throughout the entire Eucharist, often invisibly, this first major part of the service, **The Liturgy of the Word**, is specifically about the reading of scripture. The very earliest Christians read only the **Old Testament** because that was all the scripture that was. Eventually, the letters of Paul were added as scripture...then the gospel books...and then the remaining books of the New Testament as they took shape. As the Bible grew in those first few centuries, then the need for *lectionaries* eventually arose—church calendars that scheduled the readings across a year or more of Sundays. Our lectionary has a 3-year cycle of scripture readings. So, the clergy do not choose the Sunday scripture lessons in the Episcopal Church. Instead we participate in a shared

*discipline* of reading and hearing scheduled scripture readings. The expectation in reading and hearing scripture is that we may receive *a word, a message from God*. The responses after the readings is a way for the congregation to acknowledge that, yes, we have at least heard the reading with the hope of hearing a message from God.

Within Judaism, the **Psalms** are the hymnbook of their worship. Within Christianity, the Psalms are the prayerbook of the whole Church (and in many cases also serve as a hymnbook too). Jesus knew the Psalms. They give voice to the full range of the human experience before God—hope, praise, trust, fear, struggle, doubt, rage, hatred, revenge—and they do so in utter honesty to God (and in the spirit of the Collect for Purity). The Psalms are an invitation that our own personal prayers may be so utterly honest, without fear. God is big enough to take it.

The **Epistles** are letters—letters written to the early Christian churches. They can be very complicated theologically and often quite personal and candid. They testify to the timeless difficulties of being a Christian living in a *community of Christians*. They were intended to help churches *be churches* and not lose their way, following Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. They are a vivid reminder of just how regularly all churches both succeed and fail. Which logically leads us to remember again the story of the divine outreach of God in the gospel that is our true hope.

Since the early church there has been a tradition of setting the **Gospel** reading apart from the other scripture readings. And so we stand and sing as the beautiful gospel book is carried out into the nave of the church by a deacon or priest, with the crucifer often leading the way. This practice actually dates back to the early church as a *second procession* in the service. Candles were also normally carried in this procession since they were often needed to see the text. The two candles (“torches”) with handles and glass beside our altar are actually designed for the gospel procession. Making the gospel reading special with a procession is an opportunity for us to gather our attention again and focus ourselves especially on Christ, just as we did with the first procession of the gospel book and cross into the church in the beginning of the service.

In so doing, in this context of the reading of scripture, the gospels have often been seen as the norm for interpreting all of the other scripture. In other words, while we respect the integrity of the scripture readings from the old testament and the epistles, we will necessarily give priority to the experience of Christ in the gospels for how we will ultimately discern the meaning of the other scriptures. Some scripture readings can completely stand on their own terms for interpretation, while others will sometimes be clarified and even critiqued by the gospel understanding of Christ. This dramatic gospel procession and reading signals this interpretative priority in Christ when reading scripture.

Yet another reason we make the gospel reading special in this second procession is because the Church has long believed that reading the gospel in church communicates to us not just *ideas* about God, but the *real presence* of Christ—just as does the Holy Communion (p .5-7). This, of course, is no small belief.

In the early church, scripture readings were always followed by some reflection or conversation on what they may mean for those specific people in a specific time and place, as the living word of God. By the Middle Ages, these reflections by the priest became less common—and so the understanding of Christian faith by congregations waned. A key feature of the Reformation was the recovery of these reflections. Martin Luther required these reflections at every Mass. And ever since the first English prayer book of 1549, this has been required in Anglican and Episcopal worship. The name for these reflections varies between **Homily** and **Sermon**. Some Christians use the word “homily” to

refer to a short sermon by the clergy—or at least the *hope* of a short sermon! The language of “sermon” seems to have especially arose with the Protestant Reformation when homilies became much more extensive talks by the clergy. It was not unusual among early Protestants for the sermon alone to last one or two hours! Count your blessings :). But whether we call these reflections a homily or a sermon, the important thing is that the preacher reflects on some portion of the scripture in light of our experience today, hoping to become a witting and unwitting means for the living God to be heard. This takes work and a respectable amount of “fear and trembling” (Philippians 2). As such, it is also woven with mystery—for a word from God does often come to *someone* in the congregation. Every Sunday, both the preacher and the congregation wonders—when the preaching begins—just what will happen.

Until the **Nicene Creed** was written in the 4<sup>th</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Great Thanksgiving prayer in the Holy Communion (p.6) served effectively as a creed by remembering some of the key parts of the Christian story. So if you listen to the Great Thanksgiving prayer you will hear something that sounds like a creed there too. Gradually, after the Nicene Creed was written, the Nicene Creed became the most common Sunday outline of our faith. The Apostles Creed is often said by Christians at Holy Baptism. Both creeds were originally written to name a basic consensus as to what our Christian story is in response to controversies of their day. The creeds don't say *everything* we believe—or even everything we *have to personally believe*—but they are historic touchstones for the Christian faith and remain rich and evocative. In the Episcopal Church, we don't try to believe the Creed first and then say it—but *we say it in order to find our way to believing*, as best we can, over many years of praying this together, with our personal belief ebbing and flowing (p.10f). While we ebb and flow the creed continues on, generation to generation.

Intercessory prayers (prayers for others) have been in Christian worship since the beginning and quickly became litanies like we find in the **Prayers of the People**. This is a different kind of prayer than the Collect of the Day insofar as the Prayers of the People range far-and-wide across the experience of human life. These prayers do ask for God's attention and care to our concerns and yet they are even more fundamentally an expression of *our love for the world as inspired by God's love for the world*. To pray the Prayers of the People is to enter into the heart of the dynamic love of the Trinity for the world. This basis in love is why new Episcopalians especially, unfamiliar with these prayers, sometimes experience these prayers very deeply, even moved to tears. This is yet another opportunity for more experienced Episcopalians to see these prayers with fresh eyes again—and an open heart.

In the worship of the early church there was no prayer of confession or absolution as such. Instead, sin was acknowledged in the Prayers of the People, the Great Thanksgiving prayer (p.6), and the Lord's Prayer (p.8). The **Confession**, as a separate prayer, mostly evolved out of the Reformation and is found in the first English prayer book. The intent of the confession is to be comprehensive without being specific so that we may each fill in the blanks, so to speak, as we need. Sin can be all kinds of things: obsessive destructive thoughts, harmful words, damaging deeds, and acts of omission. But the heart of the matter is *a failure of love* for God, others, and ourself. To be *sorry* is to actually be aware of the difference between right and wrong and to *convict ourselves*. To *repent* is to desire to move in the direction of what is good.

Everything we know about Christ is that Christ is always open to repentance--and there is the hope of a new beginning. The **Absolution** from sin proclaimed by the priest names that absolute confidence in Christ. The hand gesture of the priest in making the sign of the cross over the congregation is actually a visible form of this belief. The priest uses a specific hand gesture, with two fingers extended, that comes from ancient Christian art of the hand blessing of Christ. The

priest repeats this hand gesture in the blessing of the Absolution and the blessing prior to the Dismissal (p.9-10). This hand gesture of Christ's blessing is found in one of our stained glass windows. Can you find it?

Some Sundays, you may have no particular awareness of sin, and it may feel somewhat false to pray the confession--then pray it on behalf of our whole congregation and for the world. Don't worry—the Sundays will come when *you* will need this prayer yourself, others praying on behalf of the whole congregation and you. And the words of Absolution will indeed mean something to you.

There are over a dozen references in the New Testament to exchanging a kiss of peace between Christians. In the early baptismal liturgies, the newly baptized were given their first kiss of peace by the congregation of the baptized. The practice of the kiss has morphed into all kinds of physical gestures, varying by the cultures Christianity has lived in: an embrace, a hand shake, a cheek-to-cheek kiss, a bow, or even a peace sign. There were many centuries when the **Passing of the Peace** was lost by the Church in its worship and not practiced. We have seen it restored in our lifetime. The Peace is not just a general, friendly howdy. It is especially a *physical prayer for others*--that the peace of Christ will be with each of us—and that none of us live in the absence of peace. We naturally want to give the Peace to people we like and love and yet it is especially for the stranger/guest at church and anyone you know who is living in some peace-bereft place in their lives. And just as we had a tangible memory of Christmas appear earlier in the service (p.2), the Peace is a tangible memory of *Easter* and the resurrection appearances of Christ who spoke peace to his peace-bereft disciples (John 20).

Christians taking up offerings to assist in ministry goes back to the days of the apostle Paul. The nature of these offerings has changed through history. In the early days of the American colonies, Grace Church would have been supported by the taxes levied by the Vestry upon the region. That was back in the day when the Vestry was not an administrative body *within a church* but a *government body for the churches and the entire regional population*. Offerings then were not needed in church except for some special occasion. But after Jefferson's bill "The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom" passed in 1786, Anglican churches like Grace no longer received tax money to operate. Ever since, the **Sunday Offering** has been the essential means of congregational self-support and outreach to the community. So you can blame Jefferson for the offering as we know it, and the annual fall stewardship campaign, if you want :). But we still don't view the offering as a momentary business transaction within an otherwise spiritual service. For Christians, money is not only about economic power but *spiritual potential*. The Christian life is always about what we do with *what are* and *what we have*—and that very much includes the power of money. The offering is necessary to sustain the life of our church community—otherwise Grace would be rendered into an historic shrine alone. But the offering is also a continuing reminder of what is so hard to remember: *gratitude to God* and *giving* (p.6) are at the center of the Christian life, without which Christianity becomes some kind of living shadow of itself.

## The Liturgy of the Table

Since Holy Communion has been celebrated somewhere in the world almost every single day since the early church, *this section of our worship has the most detailed and complicated traditions*. The level of detail and complication in the Holy Communion, while perhaps largely invisible to the congregation (except the Altar Guild!), is a sign of just how much attention has been given Holy Communion through the ages. There are traditions that have evolved over time for every single

detail--from how clergy dress for the altar, to how the altar is set up before the service, to how it is prepared during the service, the prayers at the altar, the hand gestures of the priest with the bread and wine, the kind of bread and wine, the way it is distributed, the way it is received, the way the altar is closed down at the end, the prayer after the Communion, how the altar is cleared by the altar guild, and how any remaining blessed wine and bread is reverently stored or discarded. Every little detail flows from millennia of Eucharistic practice. There are many similarities in the practice of Holy Communion between Episcopal clergy and parishes but there are also nuances of differences that come from how each clergy has been mentored and what the local customs of each parish may be. This is all very complicated, to say the least.

The Liturgy of the Table is the pinnacle of the service. Just as the Entrance Rite prepares us for the Liturgy of the Word, all that has happened up to this point is intended to prepare us for the Liturgy of the Table. There has been a lot of necessary intellectualizing and reflection up to this point and it actually intensifies here. But the pinnacle of this service is something that also transcends the deepest thoughts of the mind—it is an actual communion with God and one another. Here we enter into the deepest mystery of love.

The Holy Communion begins with the second repetition of the **Salutation** (p.2) “The Lord be with you...”. Just as the salutation before the Collect of the Day bid our attention to the Liturgy of the Word, this salutation bids our attention to the other major part of this service: the Liturgy of the Table. The salutation is our wake-up call that—oh yes—we are getting ready to do something of great importance again. Notice how the service keeps giving us cues to help recover our wandering attention.

It is also noteworthy that the language of the “heart” appears again here, just as it did in the beginning of our service in the Collect for Purity (p.1-2). “*Lift up your hearts...*” So just as the *salutation* occurs twice, to call us to attention, the *appeal to our hearts* occurs twice, to call us to the crucial importance of the heart in “seeing” God. *The heart, uniting the mind and the body, knows God by intuition, by “sense”, by resonance, by love.*

Just as the church has long believed that the *real presence* of Christ is communicated through the gospel reading (p.3), the church has also believed that the real presence of Christ is communicated through the Holy Communion that he commanded us to do in his memory. While the church has historically differed over just how to understand, talk about, and locate this real presence in Holy Communion, it has been a consistent conviction within the Episcopal/Anglican tradition. This is also why there is so much gravity and reverence given to the reading of the gospel and the act of Holy Communion.

There are four **Great Thanksgiving** prayers in Rite II and two in Rite I that are each different and come from church traditions both ancient and modern. The heart of the Holy Communion is this long prayer which the priest says at the altar with the bread and wine. The name of the entire service—the Holy Eucharist—actually takes its name from this prayer (“eucharist” means “thanksgiving”). If you listen to the prayer carefully, you will hear an outline of our Christian story of salvation. Recall that before the creeds were written, this prayer functioned as something of a creed for Christians (p.4). So this prayer, like the Nicene Creed, focuses us with an outline of our basic Christian story.

Even though the Great Thanksgiving prayer varies according to version, one of the things that is always said is the “*Holy, holy, holy...*” i.e. the **Sanctus**. These words come from the prophet Isaiah when he himself was overwhelmed by a mysterious experience of God in the Temple (Isaiah 6).

These words have been a part of our worship since the first English prayer book of 1549. Said at this point early in the Holy Communion, these words remind us that we are approaching the real presence of God in Christ.

The Sanctus transitions immediately into the **Benedictus**—the words “*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*” This is what the crowd exclaimed of Jesus when he entered Jerusalem on *Palm Sunday*. Since the 4<sup>th</sup> century, these words have been associated with Holy Communion. Here is yet another reminder that we are anticipating in this Holy Communion the coming of Christ, our risen Lord, here and now, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And at the center of the Great Thanksgiving is also always recited the words of **Institution**, recalling Jesus’ words over the bread and wine. It can be jarring to the uninitiated to hear them, with Jesus saying that the bread is his *body* and the wine is his *blood* and then, each time, saying: eat this—*eat me*. Christians have written and talked about this endlessly. Early critics within the Roman Empire just said that it was obvious proof that Christians were savages. Modern critics say that this is yet another sign that Christians are pathetically outdated and ridiculous.

At the very least, we are talking here about a plain-sense truth about how deep memories attach to food deeply experienced. Who can forget the taste of that favorite dish, say, of their mother’s? And who, eating anything similar, cannot help but also have your mother vividly brought to mind and your place at the family table? We call it a memory--and yet we could also call it more than just a memory, as if that memory still *lives*. And so who, having eaten of this Holy Communion, can ever eat just bread and wine together anywhere without remembering—Jesus, Holy Communion, and moments in church when you communed with others? *Food memories* can be very powerful. Bread and wine, used in this manner becomes a *food memory of Christ*.

The other sense of the words of Institution is unavoidably mystical. Here we need to talk about the most common definition of what a *sacrament* is: “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace”. Bread is bread and wine is wine and yet, in the praying of this prayer and the remembering of Christ, Christians have long believed that a doorway opens by the grace of God between the seen and the unseen. It isn’t magic. It is more like a promise of Christ that is still effective through the power of the Holy Spirit. So, this understanding unavoidably assumes the reality of the “unseen” realm of God—and that it can be invisibly connected to the “seen”. It also assumes an understanding of the human being as more than a biomechanical machine—but instead, the human as a mind, heart, and body *within a soul*. The mystical sense of the words of Institution by Christ definitely involves the long-standing conviction of the Church in the *real presence of Christ* in the Holy Communion. And that real presence can communicate with our souls, the deepest part of us that comes from God. This brings a whole new meaning to the idea of “soul food”! *Holy Communion is soul food*.

The **Memorial Acclamation** is a unison response of the congregation and varies according to the Great Thanksgiving prayer being used. It gives the congregation an opportunity to speak again, as it did in the Sanctus and Benedictus, and the words are a very succinct statement of belief, i.e. “*We remember his death, we proclaim his resurrection, we await his coming in glory.*” Just in case we needed to be reminded again :)

In every Great Thanksgiving prayer there are references to the **Anamnesis** (“the remembering”). The anamnesis is the opposite of *amnesia* where you *don’t remember* anything important and so don’t remember who you are. The words in the Great Thanksgiving of “memorial”, “remembering”, and “recalling” refer to the anamnesis and are about *not being Christian amnesiacs*. When we

*remember* what God has done in Christ, then it is possible for us to know God in Christ now, and to know who we are and our place in the world.

And in every Great Thanksgiving prayer there is also some reference to the **Epiclesis** (“the calling”), usually in a single sentence, when the prayer *calls upon the Holy Spirit* to bless this bread, this wine, and we ourselves gathered so that we might know the real presence of Christ. These words are always accompanied by the priest making the sign of the cross over the bread and wine—not easily seen when worshipping with a wall altar like at Grace and All Saints. The priest will also make the sign of the cross upon him/herself. The epiclesis reminds us that for Christians, the Holy Spirit and the Risen Christ are intimately connected, and that the whole point of doing Holy Communion, again, is to know the real presence of Christ, that is made real by the Holy Spirit.

The Great Thanksgiving prayer finally draws to a close and ends with a great “**AMEN**”. This amen, like all others, means that while the priest has been praying aloud on behalf of us all, that that prayer truly is the prayer of us all. The amen is our assent at the end of the prayer and it literally means: “So be it!”. Or: “You said it, brother!” :)

While the **Lord’s Prayer** has been prayed by Christians from the time that Jesus first taught it, it wasn’t until around the 5<sup>th</sup> century that the Lord’s Prayer was specifically included in the liturgy for Holy Communion. In this context, the prayer for “daily bread” also started having associations with Holy Communion as well as what we need for daily sustenance and life. But more importantly, this prayer from Jesus, said in Holy Communion, became a prayer that Christians say in and with Christ himself in his real presence, who we trust comes in the Holy Communion. We do not say this prayer by ourselves in Holy Communion—we hope we are saying the Lord’s Prayer *with Christ!*

The practical purpose of the **Breaking of the Bread** was originally to segment and prepare the bread for distribution. The priest holds up a large host which is then broken--first into halves, and then quarters. Then these quarters are distributed along with the smaller round hosts to the congregation. Symbolically, this act of breaking bread reminds us that this communion is a *sharing*—the bread is broken to be shared—and it is a sharing in Christ and a sharing with one another.

The breaking of the bread also reminds us of *Good Friday*—of the broken body of Christ in his crucifixion—part of the paschal mystery of Christ’s desolation that God turned into healing for all. With all the talk of Christ’s real presence, the breaking of the bread along with the words of Institution, reminds us of the painful memory of Christ’s death and the most difficult truth that the close sister to presence is *absence*. Christ plunged into God’s absence on the cross. And sometimes we too plunge into our own experiences of God’s absence in our life. Even in this Holy Eucharist where are embedded all kinds of verbal and physical cues to the sacramental presence of Christ, there is also frequent experience of, if you will, the *sacramental absence of Christ*. Absence is not the opposite of presence—it is actually its sister. We can only miss what we have already known. And we do know this experience so well: the times, despite our hopes and expectations and earnest seeking, when we can’t experience any obvious word from God and no clear sense of God’s presence in the Holy Eucharist. This experience is largely unacknowledged—although clergy and laity know it alike. It is not necessarily a failure of the ritual or a failure of faith. Even when we do our best to be present in the service we nevertheless never control the presence of God in Christ. The Holy Eucharist is not magic at our disposal. The presence of Christ is promised but it can also never be taken for granted. So, both the presence and the absence in the Holy Eucharist are just as mysterious. God is free—and as Jesus said, “the wind blows where it wills” (John 3).

So when the priest breaks the bread it is completely appropriate to bring to mind, if you wish, not only Christ's own experience of God's absence in the cross but also your own experience of absence and the brokenness in your own life. At the cross, Christ and we ourselves often find common ground in human vulnerability. The breaking of the bread then is another place in the service where it can get very "real"—for no one needs any instruction on the experience of absence. You know.

After the bread is broken, with solemnity, it is customary for there to be some silence, out of reverence to Christ and this mystery of suffering and redemption, absence and presence. The priest may bow or genuflect in this moment. It is often just a brief moment of silence—yet full of gravity.

Then there is said or sung what is called a **Fraction Anthem**. Usually it is what we read in the prayer book: "*Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us; therefore let us keep the feast.*" with "*Alleluias*" added especially in Easter and Christmas. The reference to Passover here recalls the old testament experience of Passover where God saved the Hebrew people enslaved in Egypt in and through suffering. But here, the Passover is specifically about the mystery of Jesus passing through his own suffering and death, into resurrection, and the power of the Holy Spirit to heal and transfigure the brokenness in our lives.

The distribution of Holy Communion occurs in different ways in different churches, depending on the church architecture around the sanctuary (the area enclosed by the altar rail), local custom, and the type of bread and wine used. The Episcopal Church exists within the larger Anglican tradition in which Communion nearly always involves real wine, a common cup (chalice), and unleavened bread (hosts). Just in the past few decades the practice became available for the unbaptized to be able to participate in Communion by crossing their arms across their chest, thereby signaling to the priest their desire to receive a blessing instead of eating and drinking. This is one way that the Communion is effectively available to anyone who is seeking and experimenting with our prayers.

The prayer after Communion, also called the **Post-Communion Prayer**, is always a very succinct statement recalling just what this Communion means and how we are invited to live differently in response to it. There are three such prayers—one in Rite I and two in Rite II. They are excellent summaries of the Christian life and worthy of praying anytime by us individually—and especially when we need to re-focus and recall the answer to the question: "Ok, just what are we doing here in Holy Communion?"

The service, once Holy Communion is completed, ends very quickly--almost abruptly. There is a sense in which there is now very little more that can be said or given today--it is just time to go on now and go forth into the world with what we have received from God. Therefore there is practically no exit rite at the end of the service like there was an entrance rite at the beginning—except, quite quickly: *blessing, singing, announcing, sending forth, and the postlude.*

We receive the **Blessing** from the priest assuring us of God's love as we get ready to venture out into the uncertainty of the world. Recall the importance of the hand gesture used by the priest in the Absolution (p.4-5). And also recall that as the service began in the naming of the Trinity then so it ends with the naming of the Trinity (p.1).

The last hymn and the third and last procession of the service follows to help us prepare for exiting.

While the prayer book does not specify when **Parish Announcements** are to be made in the service, many churches do them at the end because they often include some immediate things our church community is being "sent out" by God to live and do.

When it is finally time to go, there is a **Dismissal**—“Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” So, the intent of this service is not to reside in the many ideas the service rightly evokes. The intent is not even to reside in the deep communion with God that is promised and possible within the service. The intent of the service is, almost ironically, *to leave the service*. Or, specifically: to be sent forth, *in God’s love, for the love of the world that God loves*.

This dismissal by the deacon or priest has historically been so gladly received by the congregation that the whole service began to be called the “Mass”, by some usage--especially Roman Catholic. The word “Mass” derives from the Latin word for this sending forth at the end of the service. So to call Eucharist the “Mass” is to call the whole service “The Sending”. It is unclear if that naming has happened because people were glad to be sent by such a high calling—or sometimes just glad the service was finally over :)

The **Postlude**, like the prelude, is intended to finally help get us out the door—music for going out with God, in joy and confidence, just as we received music for coming into God (p.1-2).

## A Pastoral Addendum

With some regularity, the question is raised with priests: “What if I don’t believe all the things we are expected to say together in the Eucharist?” This kind of question is probably shared by more people than actually say it. Usually the question is specifically in reference to the Creed. This raises an important issue that is not obvious and deserves special attention here.

Episcopal worship can look like other Christian worship in various ways. But the way worship *functions* within the Episcopal Church is different in one important way: *It is not assumed here that you believe everything we pray*.

This is not an invitation to false worship—or to worship as empty ritual. It is instead a matter of one of the most basic characteristics of the Episcopal/Anglican tradition: *We don’t believe first and then pray; instead, we gradually come to belief through praying*. Our tradition doesn’t have a long list of beliefs you must have *first* in order to worship. In fact, we don’t have a long list of beliefs you must *after*.

Our basic beliefs are named in Holy Baptism:

- the desire to turn away from what is destructive
- the desire to turn toward what is constructive
- some form of love and respect for Jesus
- a willingness to worship with other Christians, learn our tradition, and care about each other
- a willingness to love your neighbor as yourself, disregarding no one.

Obviously, there is much more to Christian teaching and worship than this—and the Episcopal Church preserves this “much more” in all the words and actions of the prayer book. But this “much more” belongs more to the Church as an ancient, historic community than it does to any one individual. It is nearly impossible that any one of us can understand and believe every single detail at any given time. Plus, there are different ways of understanding each belief, i.e. the virgin birth. So

even when people say “I just don’t believe in the virgin birth so I don’t know if I should be saying the Creed”—then there really needs to be a further conversation about the different ways Christians have historically believed the virgin birth—and *then see* where you may fit in in those different traditions. *It is not enough to just say “I don’t believe in that” because rarely is there only one way to understand “that”.* Even if you don’t recognize yourself in the history of Christian understandings of various points of the Creed you still are not automatically disqualified from saying the Creed.

When we pray the whole Eucharist we are not saying “I believe every single thing in here every single time.” It is more like saying: “I want to be a part of this spiritual community and this worship of the God who somehow in some way loves us first and I want to discover as best I can just what that means and how it may change the way I live and experience the world.”

In this sense, praying the Eucharist can be viewed as an *experimental act*. We each can have sufficient reasons to be in the Eucharist, without having everything neatly understood. And we are each, effectively, looking to see where this common praying may take us next. *We pray—so that we may believe—not even necessarily today, but potentially over a long period of time.*

Praying the Eucharist as an experimental act is something that is done in *community*. We are not saying these words alone but with a group of people whose personal beliefs also vary over time, along with our own. In this sense, we support one another by praying the Eucharist together. We hold a space for each other. The Eucharist is always more than what you or I can manage to believe on any given Sunday. The Eucharist holds a space for us as a community of seekers.

This brings us to perhaps a rather shocking point. It is even possible to say the Eucharist as a non-religious, religiously-confused, agnostic or atheist. *Which actually happens in church more than you might think.* And this can actually be done with integrity. The Eucharist, as an experimental act, can also be practiced as *a valuable exercise in mindfulness apart from its devotional religious dimensions*. In fact, people of beliefs also effectively do this all the time, without even realizing it, such as when praying through or listening to parts of the service that we don’t understand in the moment. All of us sometimes will instinctively glean what we can from religious language in worship—and translate it into some equivalency that we can understand and find serviceable that may not be so explicitly religious.

This way of reading the Eucharist trusts—or at least ventures a trust—in the power of these communal words to shape our minds—and potentially our behavior—in constructive ways over time. This can happen in ways that does not necessarily require ascription to the religious ideas. It is the power of wise words read together in community that can constructively shape our character. The non-religious can read the Eucharist with integrity in this manner—just as much as the religious.

Now, it is also worth noting that for people coming to this service *with beliefs*, and praying the Eucharist devotionally with hearts open to the love of God mystically present, that the mindfulness aspect of the praying *can also happen for them* at the same time. Praying with religious intent *automatically includes* the possibility of the mindfulness practice, especially when you are aware of this potential and seek it.

So, for example, here is an outline of how key parts of the Holy Eucharist can function as a mindfulness practice, especially for anyone who seeks it:

- The Collect for Purity--inviting the intention of being completely honest with yourself
- The Lessons--seeking basic ethical guidelines for your living

- The Prayers of the People—inviting your lovingkindness toward all peoples in their various circumstances of life
- The Confession and Absolution—making a moral inventory of your life and seeking to be strengthened in goodness
- The Peace—seeking to live in peace with others
- The Great Thanksgiving—inviting gratitude into your life
- The Breaking of the Bread—cultivating the awareness of and humility of what is broken in your life and in the lives of others you are sharing this communal moment with, and holding this with tenderness
- The Communion—the intimacy that can unfold in sharing
- The Sending Forth—living constructively in the world with the mindfulness awakened in this shared exercise

God can work with such a mindfulness practice. Even if you are not sure of God. *The Holy Spirit is a specialist in such inclusive, invisible works in the human heart.*

Now, related to this issue, the question arises: *Should the non-religious, religiously-confused, agnostic or atheist who reads the Eucharist as a mindfulness practice—then receive Communion?* And the answer is actually simpler than might be imagined. *If you have been baptized*, then definitely *yes*, if you wish. Your serious questions of belief/unbelief do not invalidate your baptism. Baptism cannot be invalidated by us-- because God does not revoke God's love. So the maxim has long been: Once baptized, always baptized. Now, *if you have not been baptized*, then *no*, you would not usually receive Communion—but *you can still come forward, in community*, and cross your arms across your chest and receive a blessing just as anyone else may decline bread/wine/or both for health or spiritual reasons. These criteria for receiving Communion are the same for everyone. (If you have not been baptized and yet keep feeling drawn to receive Communion—and even do receive—then we believe you are actually being called to Baptism. For help discerning this, talk to your priest.)

Finally, *if you do come to the Eucharist with belief*—even much belief and deep spiritual experience—*then the Eucharist can definitely meet you there*. The Eucharist is implicitly a serious mindfulness practice and is effectual that way whether we realize it or not (although it does help to realize it). But the Eucharist is especially a *devotional practice for believers*, entering into the realm of the unseen and the mystical experience of God. It invites us into the mystical presence of the Risen Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the companionship of angels and archangels. It is the awakening of our souls by our spiritual hearts, joining mind and body. It is a glimpse of the healing and transfiguration of suffering, sin, and evil. It is the communion of saints, living in both the seen and unseen world. It is a foretaste of the life everlasting. It is a moment in time that is beyond time. It is an interchange between heaven and earth. It is all these things and more. This is some serious spiritual technology. And it is not something any of us are just naturally able and skilled at doing. So this devotional path is best ventured together—giving what we can, receiving what we can, Sunday after Sunday, together.

And, of course, the Eucharist is not only about these holy mysteries of God but also all about *us*, in all our humanity: with our achy bodies, our quixotic feelings and thoughts, our distractions, our bad habits, our irritability, our anxieties, our obsessions, our invisible wounds and sadness, recent joys, hopes, and longing. The Eucharist is a very fragile, human practice because *that is us*. The Eucharist is us when we also can't wait to get "sent" and get over to coffee hour and the next thing on our Sunday schedule. All of which, when you think about it, is already plenty that we have in common with everyone else who shows up for church :).