

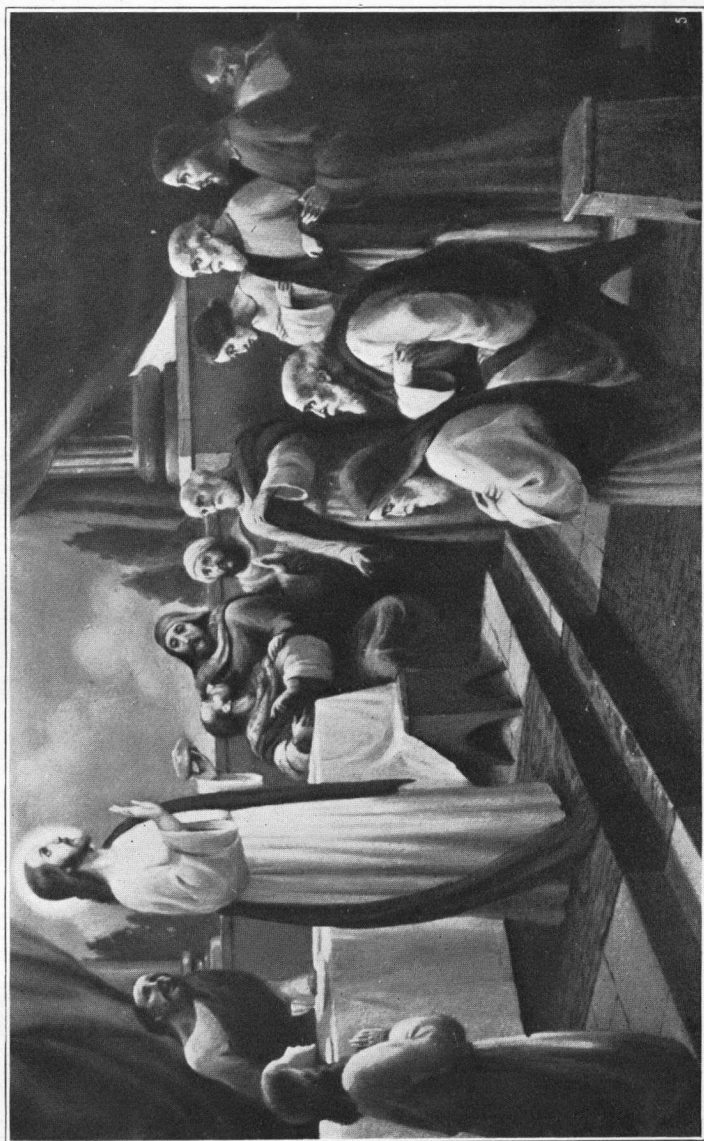
THE POSTCOMMUNION

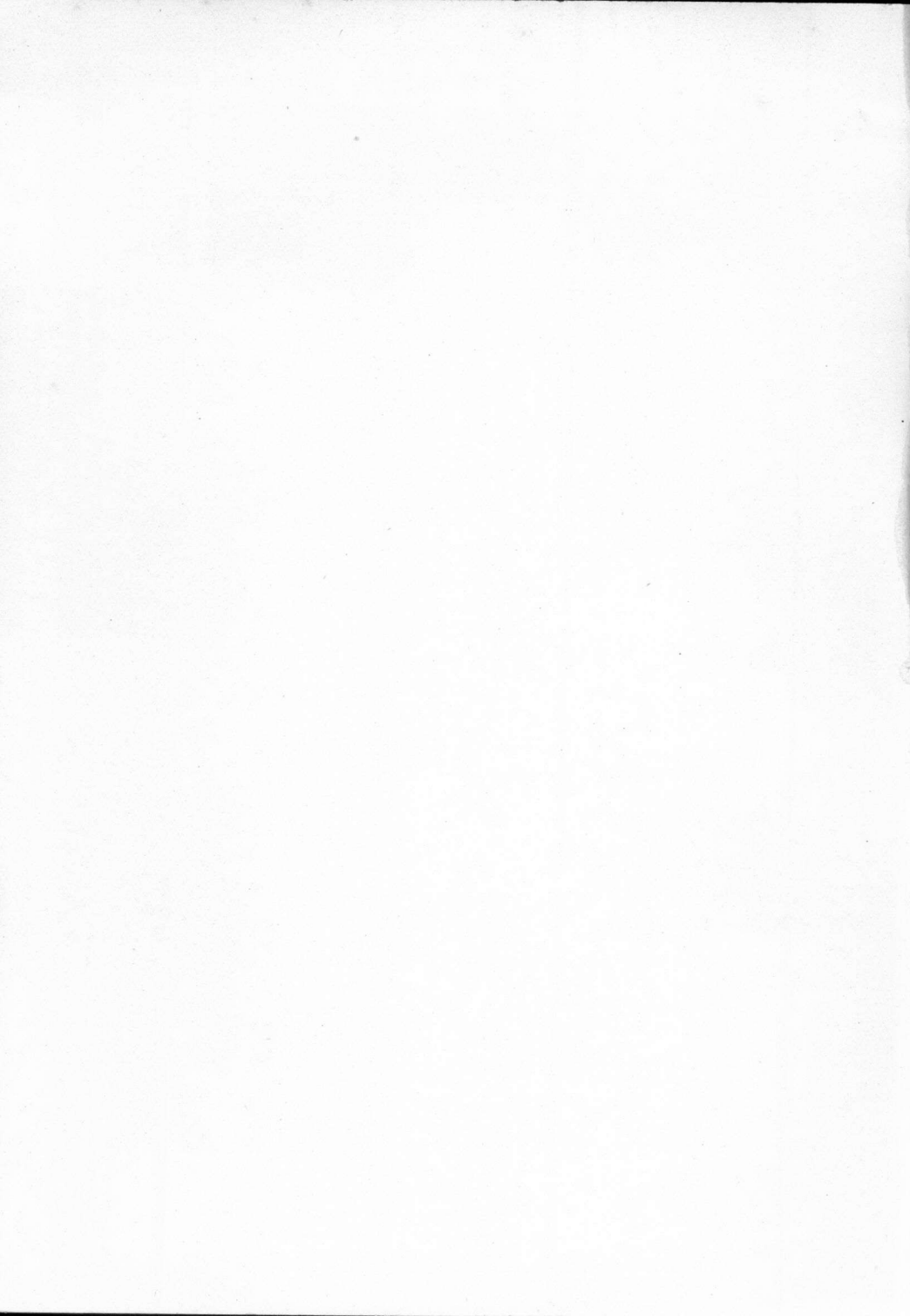
By BRO. CYRIL DORE, O. P.



THE Postcommunion of the Mass is essentially a prayer of thanksgiving and petition. Although petition differs from thanksgiving, yet the Postcommunion, which is a prayer of petition, is justly considered as a thanksgiving after Communion. Under this appellation it does not exchange the qualities and characteristics of petition and thanksgiving; it merely expresses that the petition which is contained in the Postcommunion serves also to manifest and confirm the grateful sentiments of the heart towards God. Indeed, gratitude for the benefits received during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass can be shown in no better way than by uniting our prayers and petitions with those of the priest in the Postcommunion; and thereby, offering to the Triune God a solemn act of thanksgiving. Through the mysteries of the Mass, each of the three persons in the Blessed Trinity operates in a special manner. For as St. Bonaventure tells us, "Holy Mass is as full of mysteries as the ocean is full of drops, or as the sky is full of stars. In it so many mysteries are daily performed that I should be at a loss to say whether greater or more lofty wonders have ever been accomplished by divine providence." Hence, after Communion, all who have taken part in the Mass, either by actual Sacramental Communion or by fervent Spiritual Communion, should thank God for the sublime mysteries of the altar and petition Him to continue to grant the precious graces that flow from the Mass. Moreover, these prayers are offered in union with the Holy Sacrifice itself, and come at the most suitable time,—immediately after the Communion.

This practice of stopping after the Communion, before the Last Blessing is given, to offer thanks and to petition God to grant us our needs is an integral part of the Mass and originates with the Mass itself. Although the wording of the prayers that form the Postcommunion of the Mass, has been altered during the course of the centuries, the essential qualities of petition and thanksgiving have been preserved intact. These two qualities are found in the First Mass as instituted at the Last Supper by Christ Himself. St. Matthew tells us that after the Apostles





had partaken of the Body and Blood of Christ at that First Eucharistic Banquet, "a hymn being said, they went out unto Mt. Olivet." Meschler states that this hymn must have been the Great Hallel (Ps. cxix-cxxxvi), which was a part of the Pascal feast and adequately expresses thanksgiving and petition. At this time Christ's heart was overflowing with gratitude for the many and great mysteries that He had instituted and which were to have so many glorious results. St. John in the Fourth Gospel relates more at length what Christ said and did before He and His devoted Apostles left the Cenacle. The Beloved Apostle in narrating Christ's Discourse after the Last Supper and Christ's beautiful prayer for His Disciples, further emphasizes the two qualities of petition and thanksgiving. In this account, we read that Christ said: "Amen, Amen, I say to you: if you ask the Father anything in my name, he will give it to you. Hitherto you have not asked anything in my name. Ask, and you shall receive; that your joy may be full." This joy, that Christ refers to, is the joy that follows sincere thanksgiving; while the entire exhortation manifests the manner in which Christ wishes His followers to make their petitions. In Christ's prayer for His Disciples which occupies the whole seventeenth chapter of this Gospel there are many striking examples of gratitude expressed in the form of petition. Among the many we read: "Holy Father, keep them in thy name whom thou hast given me; that they may be one, as we also are." These same sentiments have been expressed in every Postcommunion since that time.

In the "Apostolic Constitutions," which is the earliest complete liturgy extant and which dates back to the first centuries of the Church, these prayers are prescribed as a part of the Mass. Although in this liturgy as well as in the "Leonine Sacramentary" they have no title; yet, from their contents, their character is obvious. The "Gelasian Sacramentary" calls this part of the Mass the "Postcommunion," under which name it is now universally known. As it constitutes the last prayers of the Mass, the "Gregorian Sacramentary" referred to it as the "Ad complendum." During the Middle Ages the name was uncertain. Durandus calls it the "Oratio novissima." St. Thomas refers to it as the "Gratiarum actio," that is, the thanksgiving, when he says: "The whole celebration of Mass ends with the thanksgiving, the people rejoicing for having received the mys-

tery; and the priest returning thanks by prayer, as Christ, at the close of the supper with His disciples, said a hymn." (*Summa Theologica* 3a Quaestio 83, Art. 4). The first "Roman Ordo" styles it the "Oratio ad complendum"; while Rupert of Deutz gives it the name "Ad complendum." But the greater number of Mediaeval Missals call it by the title it had in the "Gelasian" book,—the Postcommunion. For instance, in the "Sarum Missal" which was used in the British Isles before the Reformation, we find it called by this name. For the Ordination of Priests, the "Sarum Pontifical" contains the following Postcommunion: "We beseech Thee, O Lord our God, that those most sacred mysteries which Thou hast bestowed upon us for the repairing of our strength, may be to us a remedy both in the present and in the future. Graciously sustain, O Lord, by Thy continual help those whom Thou dost refresh with Thy Sacraments, so that both in Thy mysteries and in our lives we may share the fruits of Thy Redemption." From this brief resumé of the history of the Postcommunion, one can easily see that this prayer has had its place in the liturgy of the Mass down through the ages; and that its substance has ever remained the same; namely, a prayer of thanksgiving and at the same time of petition proper to the sacred mystery of the Mass.

As a prayer, the Postcommunion merits more than a casual consideration. Because of its place in the Mass, its relation to the other parts of the Sacred Sacrifice, and its component parts, the Postcommunion has a prestige that is worthy of our attention and respect. First of all it stands between the Communion and the Last Blessing of the Mass. By virtue of this position it plays the double role of serving as a prayer par excellence of Thanksgiving after Communion and of petition for the blessing of God upon our work of salvation. Secondly, it is related to the Secret and the Collect of the Mass and with them it forms the three fundamental prayers of every Mass. In all these prayers the Church reveals the spirit in which she prays, subordinating the temporal and earthly to the eternal and heavenly. The Postcommunion is distinguished from these two parts by a clear-cut distinction. For the Collect expresses the idea (subject) of the ecclesiastical celebration exclusively; while in the Secret, the remembrance of the Sacrifice of the Mass takes precedence. But in the Postcommunion there exists not infrequently a reference to the reception of the Eucharist; and

there is always a spirit of thanksgiving for the sacred mysteries of the Mass expressed therein.

Lastly, in considering its component parts we observe that it contains the four elements of adoration, thanksgiving, petition and supplication. As in the Collect upon which the Postcommunion is modelled, adoration is expressed by the introductory word, "Oremus," (Let us pray) and the invocation, "O Lord," "Almighty and Eternal God," "O Merciful Lord," "O Lord our God," "O Most Holy Trinity," or some similar appellation. This first element serves to lift the mind and heart up above temporal things to the font of all goodness, to God who is the beginning and end of all things. Then follows the element of thanksgiving in which "we render thanks" to Our Divine Lord who "has nourished us by His sacred gift, the Eucharist, and drawing new strength from (His) Most Holy Sacrament, by purity of life," we hope "ever to render an acceptable service." Although thanksgiving is not always stated as precisely as it is in this Postcommunion fragment; nevertheless, it is inseparable from the element of petition. For the petition which is presented in the Postcommunion expresses these grateful sentiments in a manifold way. Chiefly, do we pray for a plenteous outpouring of all the fruits of the Mass and of the Communion celebration. Then, lastly, we find the element of supplication, which is expressed in the terminating formula, "Through Our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son, who with you (the Father) livest and reignest in union with the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen." This formula is used after the first and last prayers of the Postcommunion if there are more than two prayers said. If, however, there are only two prayers in this part of the Mass, it is said after each. These prayers follow the same order and are of the same number as the prayers said during the Collect and the Secret; and from their very nature, they are closely related to the Communion.

The Postcommunion prayers, moreover, were instituted for those who had received Holy Communion; and it was the custom in the early days of the Church for all present at the Holy Sacrifice to dispose themselves to receive the Sacrament of the Altar. For this reason, Cardinal Bona writes that, "the very name Communion (and consequently Postcommunion) would be used improperly if the greater number did not participate in the same sacrifice." And, "they have been so retained that we may

know what formerly was done, that from the very tenor of the prayers we may be excited to pristine fervor." Hence, if all present are not able to partake of actual Sacramental Communion, they should at least make use of Spiritual Communion; and, thereby, have a share in the inexhaustible riches of divine mercy flowing from the Sacrament of the Altar. At this time the heart of the Church expands with joy and exults in gratitude for the sacred, mystical nourishment of the Eucharist; and with maternal affection, she urges her children to praise God unceasingly for this treasure of grace in prayers of heartfelt thanksgiving. Hence, it can be readily seen why the Postcommunion of the Mass has been called the Thanksgiving.

Gratitude to benefactors is not only a great and sacred obligation, but it is also an exceedingly beautiful and precious virtue which seeks to repay favors that have been freely and graciously bestowed. Sincere gratitude is the distinctive character of a truly noble soul and the quality which renders one amiable before God and man. Such a person "sees eternal love bloom in every blossom" and, as St. Thomas says, "endeavors to make a return for the favors received, first, by interiorly acknowledging the noble disposition of the benefactor; and then by making manifest this gratitude by thanking his benefactor in word or in deed and by doing him good." Now, of ourselves we cannot render suitable thanks to God for the least benefit. But, in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, we are enabled to discharge our entire debt of gratitude. For during the Mass and especially after Communion we can adequately and worthily thank the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation. How appropriate are the words of a Postcommunion prayer at this time for enkindling within us a spirit of genuine gratitude to God who "has feasted us at His banquet of heavenly delights. May we never crave for ought save that which nourishes us to eternal life." Or, again, as when we pray, "Filled, O Lord, with Thy heavenly gifts may we, by Thy grace ever abide in thanksgiving for the same." In these Postcommunion prayers as well as in the numerous others that occur during the course of the ecclesiastical year, we have a veritable epitomé of all the grateful aspirations of the human heart towards God. Moreover, sharing, as we do, in the merits and satisfaction of Christ, it becomes incumbent on us to thank Him for all He has done and continues to do for us in the Sacrament of His Love. There is no time better suited to return thanks and to ask favors than

immediately after Holy Communion. For at that time we are presumably in the state of grace and our prayers become more fervent and more efficacious. By using the Postcommunion prayers profitably, we show God the gratitude that is his due; and this, in turn, becomes our best claim for obtaining new favors. Hence, by honoring the greatness and goodness of our gracious Benefactor, by esteeming and imploring His gifts and by striving as far as possible to make a return for them, the indispensable quality of sincerity, which is absolutely necessary for genuine thanksgiving, becomes apparent. And, this positive testimonial of gratitude resolves itself into the fervent and humble petitions that form the larger part of the Postcommunion prayers.

The petitions presented in the Postcommunion implore goods and gifts of the most varied kinds. They comprise all that may be beneficial to our salvation for time and eternity. In this prayer, principally, the faithful pray for a plenteous outpouring of all the benefits that flow from the Mass. At this moment, so soon after Communion, what is more opportune than an ardent desire that the Sacrificial Body and Blood of Christ may bring forth in us virtue and sanctity upon perfection? For, all that is lacking in devotion will be amply supplied by the infinite power of the Great High Priest, Jesus Christ, who offers all the merits of His Sacred Passion to God the Father in payment for our debts. St. John tells us, "We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the just." And so, when the prayers and petitions of the faithful are united with the perfect prayer of Christ, they become, as copper coins immersed in gold, beautified and ennobled. Furthermore, however numerous are the persons who offer these prayers, the Sacred Victim, Jesus Christ, can procure the fulfilment of their petitions,—so all-prevailing are the merits of His Passion, His Precious Blood, and His Sacred Wounds. Indeed, the Postcommunion prayers and petitions are not only united to the perfect prayer of Christ; but also, they are said at a time when the Sacred Victim is a prisoner of love within the bodies of worthy communicants.

These last prayers of the Mass are resplendent with devout implorations, closely united to the Holy Eucharist. The essential quality of petition is expressed in many ways in the various prayers that occur throughout the year. At one time we pray, "that the holy mysteries received may atone for our sins and fit

us to share everlastingly in the mercy of God"; at another, "Vouchsafe, we beseech thee, to cleanse us from our hidden faults, and to deliver us from the snares of our enemies"; or again, "that we may be worthy at all times to receive the gift of Thy adorable Sacrament, make us ever observant of Thy commandments." In the beautiful Postcommunion of the Mass for Corpus Christi we read, "Grant us, O Lord, we beseech Thee, one day to have our heart's desire filled in the enjoying of Thy God-head, a happiness prefigured on earth, in our being called upon to partake of the Communion of Thy Body and Blood." Time and again we ask, "that we may be worthy of the blessed promise of which the mysteries of the Mass are the pledge," or "that they whose spiritual life this holy sacrament renews may henceforth render acceptable service." From these few examples it is not difficult to ascertain the merits of the Postcommunion as a prayer of petition. Truly has it been said that there is no prayer better suited for petition and thanksgiving after Communion than those very prayers which the Church uses at that time,—the Postcommunion prayers. These prayers enable us to commune most intimately with the Shepherd of our souls.

Therefore, in concluding, we can say that from its very nature, the Postcommunion of the Mass is at one and the same time a prayer of petition and thanksgiving; that from its place in the Mass, it can be properly called the Thanksgiving of the Mass; and that from its subject matter, it is closely united to the other parts of the Mass and especially to the Sacrament of the Eucharist. These prayers have not been instituted to be admired as a part of an elaborate ceremonial prescribed for the Mass. They were instituted by Christ, Himself, to be used as an integral part of the Mass which is no empty ceremony; but rather a most certain reality. And, just as the Eternal Word made flesh, the living bread that came down from heaven, is present on our altars during the Mass; so after we participate in the Eucharistic Banquet, either by Sacramental or by Spiritual Communion, the same Christ will lavish his graces upon us and remain with us to free us from the hand of the wicked and to redeem us from the hand of the strong. Hence, it has ever been the mind of the Church, the Spouse of the Sacrificial Lamb, that the faithful use these prayers which form the Postcommunion of the Mass, and thereby express their sincere thanksgiving for the sacred mysteries of the altar through the filial and confident petitions found in these prayers.