The Eucharistic Prayer: Preface

The Preface is the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer. During the early years of Christianity, the term *preface* indicated some solemn prayer of thanksgiving offered before a congregation. Hence, it referred to the entire Eucharistic Prayer. Later on, it referred only to the introduction, and this varied according to the feast celebrated. The rest of the Eucharistic Prayer, called the *Canon*, became fixed in form.

The Preface is basically an act of thanksgiving in a literary form between prayer and hymn. It seeks to move the faithful to praise and joy. In order to be easily understood, it is rather brief, but substantial in content.

Once the Prayer over the Gifts is said, the priest addresses himself to us with hands extended and greets us in the usual manner, “The Lord be with you.” We answer, “And also with you.”

In the fourth century, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem in his Catechetical Lectures mentions two parts of this prayer that may be the most confusing to the modern-day prayer at Mass. His comments in the box below may give you new insight on how the Preface prepares us for the rest of the Eucharistic Prayer.

---

**Saint Cyril’s Commentary on Lift Up Your Hearts**

“The priest cries out: “Lift up your hearts!” For in this most solemn hour it is necessary for us to have our hearts raised up with God, and not fixed below, on the earth and earthly things. It is as if the priest instructs us at this hour to dismiss all physical cares and domestic anxieties, and to have our hearts in heaven with the benevolent God. Then you answer: “We have lifted them up to the Lord,” giving assent to it by the acknowledgment that you make. Let no one come here, then, who could say with his mouth, “We have lifted them up to the Lord,” while he is preoccupied with physical cares.

---

The priest begins by invoking the Lord’s Presence upon us, and we in return ask the Lord to be with him. Then he tells us to lift up our hearts. Notice Cyril’s comment on this. If at the beginning of the liturgy we are weighed down with our earthly cares, the Preface now asks us to set them aside. Lifting up our hearts means transcending the present difficulties and joining the heavenly liturgy, where all our troubles will vanish in the twinkling of an eye.

A fraternal sharing of personal decisions and aspirations is thus established—as if each one felt the need to be strengthened by everybody else’s optimism and daring to climb the mountain, as Moses did, and meet God. The priest continues, and urges us on: “Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God.” And we answer, “It is right to give him thanks and praise.” Not one word of this dialogue has changed since the third century. Almost without realizing it, we find ourselves affirming that it is right to give thanks to God always and everywhere, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

The Preface is ancient. It goes all the way back to the early Church when it was still a sect within Judaism. Most of the elements of the prayer, including the “Holy, Holy,” were part of a prayer said every morning in the synagogue.

One way of thinking of this prayer is to remember someone who has so much to thank someone for that he keeps listing the reasons—you did this for me, and you did this for me, and as though that weren’t enough you even did this for me. The Preface builds up to a joining with all the heavenly hosts (whom we have joined because we’ve lifted our hearts up to heaven) and singing with them.