

THE PRAYER OF THE HEART
BY LAWRENCE CUNNINGHAM, PH.D.

LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS!



The old cliché tells us that familiarity breeds contempt, but it can also be said that familiarity may just produce familiarity. Routine, to be sure, is an anchor point in life, but routine can also be deadening. We can take for granted our health, our friends, our loved ones, and it is only when we have a health problem or a crisis involving friends that we reflect on how much we have assumed that things always go along merrily.





Fr. Jim Gallagher, C.S.C. presides at a celebration of the Eucharist attended by members of the Echo program at the Siegfried Hall chapel of Our Lady Seat of Wisdom (University of Notre Dame)

Photo by Luke Slonkosky (2012), courtesy of Echo.

What is true about the routine of daily life is also true of our spiritual lives. Even in our desire to be a faithful follower of the Lord, it is all too easy to fall into a rut where our prayers become rote, our reception of Holy Communion becomes what we do on Sundays, our moral choices are made out of a routine of perfunctory duty, and our lives go on without reflection. Is it not the case that the Church provides us Advent and Lent and days of recollection or periods of retreat to try to shake us out of just such mindless conformity in order to refocus on the path of Christ?

The line of thinking outlined above came to me a few weeks ago while attending Sunday Mass where, in a fit of distraction, I stood up, sat down, and knelt as a kind of vague participant in the parish liturgical dance. Reflecting on how automatic my participation in the liturgy can be led me to think that I have attended Mass so long that its richness has become for me too well worn and rarely fully attentive.

Perhaps that is the reason why the liturgy introduces the preface to the Eucharistic Prayer with the great cry: “*Sursum Corda!*” (“*Lift up your hearts!*”).

That imperative invitation for the congregation to raise or lift their hearts is very ancient. It is attested in the liturgy from the late-third century in the old *Apostolic Tradition* and acts as an opening line of every ancient Eucharistic Prayer in both the East and the West. The old Byzantine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom provides, as it were, a warning given by the deacon in anticipation of that cry: “Let us stand well/Let us stand in awe/Let us be attentive that we may present this holy offering in peace.” The priest utters a blessing and then intones: Lift up your hearts!

What does it mean to lift up one’s heart? The word *heart* occurs over a thousand times in the Bible. Most frequently, as in the Book of Psalms, there is a contrast between the evil and the pure heart. The heart is the deep center of a person where that person truly is. That is why Jesus says, echoing the Psalms, that the pure of heart will see God.

To lift up your heart is to turn your true self away from the self and towards God. That is the deepest form of prayer—the prayer of the heart. “In naming the source of prayer, the Scripture speaks sometimes of soul or the spirit, but most often of the heart. According to Scripture it is the heart that prays. If our heart is far from God, the words of prayer are in vain.”¹ When the celebrant urges us to lift our hearts, he is saying in effect that we should open our hearts to participate in the Eucharistic liturgy in a deeper sense than being simply present out of duty. In the words of the Byzantine deacon, we should be “attentive.” Attention means to be alert to what is to come; to focus on what is to happen. It is not easy to keep that focus at all times. Often we nod our way through the liturgy just as we can nod our way through the ordinary routine of daily life itself. It is in those moments when we are jerked out of the ordinary, when the words take on a meaning that we had hitherto let pass over us like white noise, that we get an insight into the awe-ful truth that stands behind the language of prayer: that our hearts are lifted as a pure gift of grace.

To lift up our hearts is a species of conversion—turning towards the Word of God present in the community, in the proclamation of the Scriptures, and preparing ourselves to receive the Body and the Blood of Christ. Every conversion implies an aversion—turning towards is a way of turning from. To lift up our hearts is a turning away from the mundane in order to sense again the presence of God. If we can, on occasion, open our hearts, we will find God there. St. Augustine said this well when he observed in one of his sermons that in our heart we find “a vast inner shrine, and a lovely quiet place. O that inner quiet, where there is no boredom, no bitterness from evil thoughts, no harassment by temptation and sorrows!”² In this life we may not be able to sense what is in our hearts constantly as we go about the ordinary business of living, but when we pause we can get a clear sense that God is with us. One way to do that is to modify a bit the imperative invitation of the priest and say, as a prayer, *O Lord, lift up my heart!*



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NOTES

- 1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2562.
- 2 Augustine of Hippo, Homily 25 on the Gospel of John.