

Understanding Episcopal Liturgy

#6. What is the reason the congregation is invited to stand for the Eucharistic Prayer?

The Eucharistic Prayer (or Great Thanksgiving) is the series of prayers and responses that are said (or sung) as the priest is standing at the altar following the offertory. At the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer the congregation is invited to stand. This might seem a bit odd to many people, since the Eucharistic Prayer can be five or even ten minutes long. But there is a specific reason we invite people to stand for the Eucharistic Prayer.

Our story starts back in the olden days, about fifty years ago. In the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, some Episcopal Churches and some Episcopalians gave a lot of attention on the sinfulness of humankind. In many churches Sunday worship began with the Decalogue or the Penitential Order. In the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, much of the preaching, teaching, hymns and anthems gave a lot of attention to human mistakes (aka, sins). In many parishes the celebration of communion happened just once a month.

About sixty years ago the Episcopal Church began a steady move away from this penitential focus on human sin. The reason for the change is not that people are sinning less; the reason is to give more attention to the saving power of God's love in our lives. We continue to say the confession each Sunday, yet we want to give more of our attention to what God is doing in our lives than to our mistakes.

Our weekly use of the Great Thanksgiving is the clearest result of the change in perspective. The Eucharist (which means 'thanksgiving') is a time when we acknowledge our mistakes but give much more attention to the power of God's love in our lives. Most of the time we do not kneel for the entire Eucharistic Prayer because kneeling can have the effect of directing our attention towards our mistakes at a time when it is right to give our attention to the power of God's love and grace to strengthen and heal us.

In today's Eucharist Prayer the priest will say these words: "Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal." In Eucharistic Prayer B the priest says, "In him, you have delivered us from evil, and made us worthy to stand before you." During the Great Thanksgiving each person is free to stand, sit or kneel. Take the posture

that works for you, yet consider the way God's grace empowers us and makes us whole. God's saving love is much greater than the mistakes we are making.