

The Mass Part 4: Presentation of the gifts

Before moving forward let's review.

One week ago, we saw that the church considers the Liturgy of the Word power-packed. What the liturgy's actions say, the word of God enacts, or as the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" says: "The liturgical word and action are inseparable both insofar as they are signs and instruction and insofar as they accomplish what they signify."

Two weeks ago, we observed how the entrance rites developed in the church's history. At the time of St. Justin Martyr in A.D. 155, they were very rudimentary (see CCC, 1345), but other parts of Mass, including the procession of gifts, were already being done.

Three weeks ago, we examined some liturgical concepts that are helpful in understanding the Mass, especially how the liturgy makes use of signs and symbols to communicate God's grace to us.

All three of these — symbols, gifts, and word plus action — are important for the part of the Mass we look at today: preparation of the gifts.

Sometimes this is also called this the "offertory," but since the bread and wine will be supremely "offered" in the eucharistic prayer, we'll use the term preferred by the General Instruction of the Roman Missal.

— Presentation of the gifts assumed great importance in the early church.

St. Cyprian, martyred in Africa in 258, chided those who came to Mass and received the Eucharist but made no offering of their own: "You are wealthy and rich, and do you think that you celebrate the Lord's Supper, not at all considering the offering? Who comes to the Lord's Supper without a sacrifice, and yet take part of the sacrifice which the poor man has offered? Consider in the Gospel the widow . . ."

St. Augustine was impressed by a fifth-century procession of gifts in Rome in which the faithful brought from their own homes things from their kitchen tables. (After handling all the gifts, no wonder the priest had to wash his hands!)

Augustine called this an “admirable exchange” — for their gifts God gave back Jesus. Our present prayer over the gifts from the sixth day in the octave of Christmas uses Augustine’s language: “Lord, receive our gifts in this wonderful exchange: from all you have given us we bring you these gifts, and in return, you give us yourself.”

— Valid matter. The church uses unleavened bread made only of pure wheat flour and water, and wine only from grapes. Why?

Because that’s what Jesus used. He told us to “do this” in his memory, and if “this” changes too much, we’re no longer following his command.

Even in places of the world where wheat or grapes are scarce, the church still insists that these foodstuffs be imported instead of substituted with local products such as corn flour or rice wine. For persons with celiac disease or alcohol intolerance, the church permits virtually gluten-free hosts and mustum, wine whose fermentation has been arrested.

— Collection of money. Yep, it’s in the Bible. “From the very beginning, Christians have brought, along with the bread and wine for the Eucharist, gifts to share with those in need” (CCC, 1351). Tithing and almsgiving are acts of worship (2 Corinthians 9:10-15) and express not only our desire to help those in need but also our generosity to God.

A \$20 bill and a \$1 bill are next to each other in a man’s wallet. The \$20 bill says, “Isn’t life great! I get to go to the best places: to movies and nice restaurants and the mall.” The \$1 bill replies, “Well, I go to church.” (Right about now lots of people are upset with me, while pastors are secretly sighing, “Thank you Father Tom!”)

— Made by hand. The ordinary form of Mass uses adapted Jewish “berakah” (blessing) prayers whose words are packed with meaning, even if they’re done silently during the music.

Bread and wine symbolize a wonderful cooperation between God and humans. We

lay upon the altar not only creation's goods but ours, too. The gifts are not mere wheat and grapes, but "the work of human hands."

Symbolically, that's us on the altar, offering ourselves to God. In the eucharistic prayer, we will ask God to send the Spirit to change the gifts and change us as well — but, again, I'm getting ahead of myself.

The gift of ourselves is never easy, and the church, knowing that, treats our offerings with great care. The priest places them in a dignified place on the altar, incenses them reverently, and asks God to receive them to himself.

"Pray, sisters and brothers, that our sacrifice" — not only bread and wine, but what they symbolize: our work, struggles, joys, money, our very lives — "may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father."

In the next part of Mass, the great eucharistic prayer, it happens: the Holy Spirit comes down, and as the words of Christ are repeated over the bread and wine . . . Stay tuned!

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