

The New Missal Series, Part Four: Becoming the Body of Christ

The Preparation of the Gifts and the Altar are more than the collection or the practical elements of preparing the bread and wine. This part of the Mass begins the second major part of the celebration, the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Usually a song is sung, again disparate voices are joined together into one voice of the body of Christ.

The collection is taken up from among the people. Our financial gift is a tangible sign of the sacrifice we make for Christ. Practically speaking, this collection allows the Church to do the works of Christ: to proclaim the Gospel through education and evangelization efforts, celebrate the sacraments through the efforts of the priest and other ministers, and to reach out to the poor and those in need. But our sacrifice is more than dollars and cents. It is the countless ways throughout the week that we have struggled to act like Christ, working to avoid evil and striving to do good. These we bring to the altar along with our financial gifts, all ways we participate in the Sacrifice of Christ.

All of these are symbolized by the bread and wine brought up in the offertory. Jesus took bread and wine at the Last Supper and used these elements to signify his Body and Blood. Bread is a staple of life and can provide basic sustenance. In the time of Jesus and today, bread is also a sign of God's providence. God fed his people in the desert with manna, bread from heaven. Bread is also reminder of the activity of Jesus who took the five loaves and fed thousands of people. If bread is a symbol of the basic necessities of life, wine is a symbol of all that is good, of the superabundance of God. Wine provides pleasure and makes us feel good. Jesus worked his first miracle by turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana. Jesus would take these two elements, with all of their inherent and symbolic meanings and use them to make God present, His presence among us.

In the offertory, the people offer their gifts and themselves to Christ through the representatives of the people presenting the gifts of bread and wine to the priest. The priest takes the bread and wine and offers a prayer over each. He asks God's blessing to prepare these elements for the transformation God will achieve just a

short while later. These prayers also summarize the way God works in the world and will change slightly in the new translation to highlight this truth.

Each prayer recognizes the element as gift: God provided the wheat and the grapes. But each element is also recognized as the product of human effort. Through that effort wheat is transformed into bread and grapes into wine. What we offer to God, then is what God gave us combined with what we have done. God will then take what we offer and transform it into the body of Christ.

This is most profoundly true of the bread and wine which will become the Body and Blood of Christ, but it is also true of those gathered. We bring our sacrifices to Mass and offer them to the father. God takes what we offer and transforms us to be the body of Christ in the world. The preparation closes with the Prayer Over the Gifts which changes with each Mass but always references the transformation of bread and wine and of those gathered.

See the General instruction of the Roman Missal (##72-75) and Chapter 4 in Father Jeremy Driscoll's book, "What Happens at Mass."