

## THE MASS (Part 3)

### THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST (Part A)

This is made up of:-

- A) *Preparation of the Gifts*
- B) *Eucharistic Prayer*
- C) *Communion Rite*

#### INTRODUCTION:

The **New Testament** accounts of the Last Supper highlight certain basic actions of Jesus at the **final meal** that he shared with his disciples. These actions are that Jesus:-

1. took bread
2. gave thanks and blessed it
3. broke it
4. and gave His Body in the form of bread to the disciples

Towards the end of the meal Jesus:-

5. took a cup of wine
6. gave thanks and blessed it
7. shared the cup of His Blood with the disciples

The very early Christian community, conscious of Christ's words – "***Do this in memory of me***", continued to celebrate the Eucharist within the context of a meal. A number of factors were soon to change this. For example, with the **growing number of Christians**, the ability to provide a regular meal each week became practically impossible. So, as a consequence, two major changes occurred. The Eucharist was taken away from the meal, and secondly, simplification took place. The 7 actions mentioned above became 4 actions. These were:-

1. Bread and wine were taken and placed on the table together.
2. One prayer of thanksgiving to God was offered over the bread and wine together.
3. The bread was broken.
4. The Body and Blood of the Lord were distributed.

#### PREPARATION OF THE GIFTS

This consists of:- Preparation of the altar, presentation of the gifts, offertory hymn, prayers at the preparation of the gifts, mixing of water and wine, "*Lord God, we ask you*", washing of the hands, prayer over the gifts and its invitation to go further.

**Introduction:** The lifting up of the bread and wine by Christ at the Last Supper was a gesture of pointing out, or of calling attention to the bread and wine. **Historically**, the deacons in Rome brought the bread and wine to the bishop or priest. A little later the people themselves brought the gifts to the altar. In the early **Middle Ages** the rite became quite complex, with

many prayers being prayed. The rite was then simplified by eliminating or modifying many of the additions from the Middle Ages.

Although the preparation of the altar and gifts is the beginning of the Eucharistic celebration, it has a secondary character, since it prepares for, and leads to the Eucharistic Prayer. **The purpose of the rite is to prepare the altar, the gifts and the community for the offering to come.**

### **Preparation of the Altar:**

The manner of preparing the altar was originally quite **simple**. In earlier times, a linen cloth was spread upon the table, the bread and wine were brought by the ministers and people and were placed upon it. Then, many practices came about, ranging from the simple to the **complex** and lengthy. In our time, the altar is prepared at the beginning of the preparation rite when the corporal (square white cloth that the vessels are placed on), purifier (white cleansing cloth), chalice and sacramentary (red book of prayers – green at Wardell) are placed upon it. Its preparation at this time makes clear that **something new** is beginning. Just as the **Ambo** was the focal point for the Liturgy of the Word, so the **Altar** is the centre of the Eucharistic liturgy. While the altar should be clearly designed in the shape of a table, it should more correctly be referred to as the '**altar**', as '**table**' tends to deny its **sacrificial and sacred nature**.

### **Presentation of the Gifts (Offertory Procession):**

One of the most ancient customs of the Church is that of the people themselves providing the bread and the wine for the Eucharist. They would produce them at home and bring them along on Sunday. As the Jewish and Roman based liturgy spread to other lands the people also brought forward oil, candles, wheat, grapes and other items of precious value.

**Today**, the procession of gifts is intended to carry on the spiritual value and meaning of the ancient custom when the people brought bread and wine for the liturgy from their homes. It is a **symbolic** expression of the assembly's **participation** in the Eucharist. Furthermore, in our time the **financial contribution** of those who are making a commitment from their own earnings is brought forward with the gifts of bread and wine.

In the years immediately **following Vatican II**, a practice arose of many things being brought forward at this time – e.g. footballs, flowers, candles, etc. This was brought to a close by a **more accurate understanding** of the gifts themselves – the bread and wine – along with the modern representation of the people bringing the bread and wine from their homes, the financial offering.

### **Offertory Hymn:**

The practice of accompanying the presentation of the gifts with a hymn may have originated in north Africa (St Augustine 354-430). The

purpose of the hymn was to fill in the time that it took for the presentation of the gifts and the setting up of the altar. The function of the offertory hymn is to accompany the procession and highlight its **communal** aspects. Hymns expressing **praise** and **joy** as well as hymns of the **season** (e.g. Easter or Lent) are appropriate. The hymn need not speak of bread and wine or of offering. Soft instrumental music or silence may be chosen as an alternative preparation for the Eucharistic Prayer.

**Prayers at the Preparation of the Gifts:** (*“Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread/wine to offer....”*)

Until the 11<sup>th</sup> century, there was only one prayer and that was the prayer over the gifts, which now comes at the end of this preparation rite. Over time, various prayers were added to accompany and to fill out the rite. Some were designed to deepen the spirituality of the priest. Today, the focus of these prayers is the **praise of God**. They are modelled on a **Jewish table prayer**, which blesses or praises God as the creator of the world for the gifts of bread and wine. This is also in line with our reflections on the Liturgy of the Word and its origins in Jewish prayer life.

These prayers recall the source, meaning and goal of the gifts. They can be **prayed out loud or quietly by the priest**. You may notice that when the hymn continues, the priest may say these prayers quietly.

**Mixing of Water and Wine:** (*“By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity”*) - usually said quietly by the priest

The mixing of water and wine is an ancient liturgical practice in both the eastern and western parts of the Church. It was common practice, both in religious circles and in peoples homes, because of the wines heavy texture, to dilute it with water. So this **took on other meanings** in the religious sense. The mingling of water came to represent the union of Christ with the faithful. The water and wine came to represent the human and divine nature of Christ mixed together. In our time, it has been maintained mainly for these traditional reasons.

**“Lord God, we ask you”:** (*“Lord God, we ask you to receive us and be pleased with the sacrifice we offer you with humble and contrite hearts.”*)

This is one of the priest’s private prayers. It originates from the book of Daniel. Looking ahead to the Eucharistic Prayer, the priest requests that the future offering will be favourably received by God.

**Washing of the Hands:**

Washing one’s hands as a sign of inner purity was customary in both Judaism and early Christianity. At first, no prayer accompanied the action. A number were introduced over time. Today, the washing of the hands is accompanied by Psalm 51:2 and is said quietly by the priest. (*“Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sin.”*)

**Prayer Over the Gifts and its' Invitation:**

*“Pray, (brethren/my friends) that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.” “May the Lord accept this sacrifice at your hands.....”*

In the ancient Roman liturgy, once the bread and wine were placed on the altar, the bishop or priest said a prayer over these gifts and then began the Eucharistic Prayer. Today's form of prayer came into use after the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Today, the priest addresses the invitation to the whole congregation and all pray together that the sacrifice (bread and wine) may be acceptable and pleasing to the Father.

One of the important understandings given us by the Council Fathers of Vatican II is that we do not need to be engaging in obvious involvement on the sanctuary to be intimately involved in the liturgy. **Concentration** on, and **involvement** in the prayers and actions of the Mass is what is meant by **'active involvement'**. This is one of the most misunderstood points of the current liturgy.

The Prayer over the Gifts concludes the preparation of the bread, wine, altar and community. The prayer requests divine acceptance and expresses the community's desire to unite itself with the offering of the bread and wine which is to come during the Eucharistic Prayer.

**Next Week: Part 2 of the Liturgy of the Eucharist: the Eucharistic Prayer.**