



Fr. Daniel's Corner

Mass Moment: Part 20

THE OFFERTORY:

The offertory is the rite by which the bread and wine are presented (offered) to God before they are consecrated, and the prayers and chant that accompany it. Bread and wine are the official gifts presented but they also represent our very lives given to God. In the Old Testament the priest always sacrificed something separate from himself, (an animal, occasionally libations or cereal offerings). But in the New Testament, Jesus the High priest offers his very self. The priest and the victim are one and the same! Each of us in baptism are made priest (different from ministerial priests), prophet and king. As priests we are asked to offer our own self to God. The bread and wine are brought forward but we place our own lives on the paten and in the chalice. Further, our gift of money, of our substance, is also a symbol of our very self.

The Gifts of bread and wine are placed on the altar with accompanying prayers. The host, referring to the bread, is from the Latin, "Hostio" meaning I kill, I slaughter, and hence means "victim." The priest says a short prayer either audibly or in a low voice over the bread and wine thanking God for the gifts and acknowledging them as "fruit of the earth and work of human hands." It is important to highlight that the transformation of these elements (bread and wine) is anticipated with this short prayer: "It will become for us the bread of life. It will become for us a spiritual drink." Furthermore, the custom of mixing wine with water is symbolic, a holy exchange (the union of Christ and his people)- that through the mixture of the water and wine we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity. It immediately reminds us also that blood and water flowed from his sacred side when he was pierced with the lance (Jn 19:34). Like the water in the wine, we are absorbed into Christ as we become what we consume.

Sometimes the gifts are incensed, a ritual gesture, marking the soon to be consecrated gifts as holy. The altar is also incensed, marking it as holy. The table on which the gifts lie is designated as the holy place that is truly the center of the world: the place of Christ's paschal sacrifice. Then the priest is incensed because he is acting in the person of Christ, the head of the body, the Church. Also, the gathered assembly is incensed to indicate that they themselves are what lies on the altar. Like sweet fragrance, a perfect and acceptable sacrifice is offered, and our prayer rises to the Father like incense.

After this, the priest moves slightly to one side of the altar, ritually washing his hands (known as *lavabo*) while praying the words of David in Psalm 51:2, "Wash me, O Lord, from my iniquities, and cleanse me from my sins." This ritual recalls the old practice of the Levitical priests, who before entering the 'holy of holies,' prepared themselves by the washing of hands. It also recalls baptism and the washing away of sins, and the priest's personal desire for interior purity. Acknowledging his own human frailty, the priest asks for God's help so he can worthily offer the sacrifice. As the people see him washing his hands, they should be reminded of the same. Now, the hands of the priest become a new purpose. Christ will make the hands of the priest his own hands, for there is only one priest, and the hands that will take up these gifts, transform them, and offer them to the Father, are the hands of Christ.

Finally, the prayer over the gift concludes the offertory with the invitation: "pray brethren that *my* sacrifice and *yours* may be acceptable to God the Father Almighty..." Note the emphasis on MY and YOURS- MY, establishing the sacred character of this sacrifice offered through the priest acting in the person of Christ, and YOURS, referring to the entire Church offering the Mass in union with Christ. The people's response that "May the Lord accept this sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his name..." is an acknowledgment that the sacrifice belongs to Christ and that we have a share in its divine merits.

And that is your Mass Moment for the week.