

# (Re-) Learning the Mass

## Part 14 – Liturgy of the Eucharist

At the Last Supper Jesus instituted the banquet of his Body and Blood, his Paschal Sacrifice, pointing to the consummation of his sacrifice on the Cross. When he met in the Upper Room with his disciples, Jesus took bread and wine, gave thanks, and broke the bread and gave it to his disciples, saying: “Take, eat and drink; this is my Body; this is the chalice of my Blood. Do this in memory of me.” (*GIRM*, 72)

Corresponding to this pattern which Jesus established at his Supper, in the Liturgy of the Eucharist there are three main movements: the Preparation of the Gifts (taking up the bread and wine); the Eucharistic Prayer (giving thanks); and the Communion rite (breaking the bread and giving it to the disciples).

At the Preparation of the Gifts, sometimes in the past known as the “Offertory” (by which name the chant antiphon given for this time in the Mass is still called), the altar and the gifts are prepared. The name ‘Offertory’, while not technically incorrect, has been de-emphasized in the reformed rite of Mass in order to re-emphasize that the true offering occurs during the Eucharistic Prayer, while this moment is a preparation for that offering.

The ceremonies of the Preparation of the Gifts arise from a practical purpose: the bread and wine need to get to the altar, and ready to be offered to God. But as with so many liturgical moments, this practical action is imbued with rich spiritual meaning. In the early days of the Church (and still in some parts of the world), people often gave gifts in kind, rather than monetary donations. This included bread and wine, both for the celebration of the Eucharist, as well as for the poor and the clergy. And so today, a remnant of that practice is preserved in the possibility of members of the faithful presenting the bread and wine to the priest.

Members of the assembly present the bread and wine because they represent us. In preparing to offer the bread and the wine, we are also preparing to offer ourselves, in union with Christ in his self-offering to the Father. When the Bishop ordains a priest, he hands him bread and wine for the Eucharist, saying: “Receive the oblation of the holy people, to be offered to God.”

Think about these words at Mass the next time the faithful hand the bread and wine to the priest! As Pope Francis has said, “in the symbols of the bread and wine, the faithful place their offering in the hands of the priest who places them on the altar...” (*Catechesis on the Mass*).

Therefore, when incense is used, not only are the altar and the bread and wine incensed, but also the priest(s) and the entire assembly. We are all part of the gift that is ultimately being offered to God! Incense in the Church signifies “the Church’s offering and prayer rising like incense in the sight of God” (*GIRM* 75, cf. Ps 141, Rev 8:3-4)

This is why this part of the Mass is seen as appropriate for taking up the collection – not just because we’re all sitting around looking for something to do! Our monetary contributions for the Church, the poor, and other worthy causes are another symbol of our self-offering. However, since monetary offerings are not in themselves destined for the Eucharist, but are rather gifts to others, the rubrics state that “given their purpose, they are to be put in a suitable place *away* from the Eucharistic table.” (*GIRM*, 73).

When the gifts have been received and the altar prepared with the linens, the chalice, and the Missal, the priest says several prayers, rich in content. He speaks about how we use created things (wheat and grapes), transformed by human labor (bread and wine), and offer them to be transformed by God for our benefit- a beautiful and succinct catechesis on the sacraments.

When the chalice is prepared, a small amount of water is added to the wine. Once again, this is a practical matter that over time became imbued with spiritual symbolism. In the ancient Greek and Roman world, wine was customarily diluted before drinking. The priest or deacon prays that this inherited practice be a symbol of our coming to share in Christ’s divinity, “who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” This can also be a reminder of the blood and water which flowed from Christ’s pierced side (Jn 19:35).

