

Lesson 15: Washing of the Hands

Action:

Last week we talked about the offering of the gifts of bread and wine to God the Father. The blessings the priest prays over the bread and the wine are very similar to the words Jesus likely said at the Last Supper when He offered the Bread and Wine to the Father. They are derived from ancient Jewish prayers, called the Kiddush. These prayers are still in use today by religious Jews who celebrate the Sabbath.

After the gifts of bread and wine are offered to the Father, the priest washes his hands. Before doing so, however, he steps back slightly from the altar, bowing deeply, and prays quietly, “Lord God, we ask you to receive us and be pleased with the sacrifice we offer you with humble and contrite hearts.” He then stands up, turns and walks to the corner of the altar where he washes his hands. As the water is poured on his hands he prays, “Wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sin.”

History:

This hand washing originally had a very practical significance. In ancient Jewish sacrifices, when animals were sacrificed, washing hands was necessary. And in the early years of the Church when the people brought

forward bread, wine, oil, candles, and vegetables to help support the parish and the poor, washing hands after receiving all of these gifts made sense.

Gradually, the washing of hands became a symbolic reminder to the priest that he is imperfect and sinful. The first prayer that the priest prays quietly is one of contrition. As he bows before the altar, he asks that the Lord would be pleased with the sacrifice that is being offered by him, not out of pride but out of humility and contrition. The second prayer as he washes his hands calls to mind the Passion of our Lord and the act of Pontius Pilate before the crowd, but is more of an act of ritualizing the prayer of Psalm 51, “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin” (Psalm 51:2).

What we can do to better participate in this part of the Mass

The prayers offered by the priest should remind each of us that we are all part of the sin of the world. While our individual sins are very real it is important that we be cleansed of contributing to the sinfulness that infects the world. As you watch the priest wash his hands, we should also pray silently, Lord, wash away my iniquity and free me from my sin, as well.