



The Sacrifice of the Mass and Our Call to Mission



Part 2

The Preparation of the Gifts

This is the second of six reflections on the relationship between the Sacrifice of the Mass and our call to mission. This insert explores the meaning and importance of the preparation of the gifts as part of the liturgy of the Eucharist and as one of the elements that distinguishes the celebration of Eucharistic celebration from a Word and Communion service.

The Preparation of the Gifts

Most people know that the preparation of the gifts occurs when we sit down after the homily and the prayer of the faithful. The meaning of this ritual, however, is not always so clear. Musicians sometimes consider this an important moment for singing something they have rehearsed all week. In some communities, this is when children come back from their own Liturgy of the Word and are reunited with their families. For most of us, however, this is the time for the collection, when we put our envelope into the basket.

Amazingly many Catholics revert to language from a previous era and call this the “offertory” of the Mass. While a common belief, it is also inaccurate. The new *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (n. 73) clearly notes that this

is a “preparation of the gifts” (in Latin, *praeparatio donorum*). It is not when the gifts are “offered” but when they are prepared for an offering that comes later in the Mass. As the *General Instruction* notes (n. 79), the offering occurs later during the Eucharistic prayer. Thus, in Eucharistic Prayer III, the priest-president says *Father, calling to mind the death your son endured for our salvation, his glorious resurrection and ascension into heaven, and ready to greet him when he comes again, we offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice.*

Sacramental preparation for Offering

If the preparation of the gifts is not a time of offering but preparation for that offering, how does it contribute to our understanding of the Eucharistic Sacrifice as our call to mission? Jesus’ once and for all sacrifice on the cross was a gift beyond our comprehension and one to which we can never adequately respond. Even though our response is inadequate, we must respond for this is a holy exchange which God has initiated. The preparation of the gifts is a key ritual for expressing that response to God’s graciousness by returning to God gifts given to us.

We return gifts brought forth from the earth through human effort and ingenuity. But this return of gifts is not done to manipulate God or appease God so that we can keep on receiving. Rather, we return these gifts of creation as a way to rehearse our own self-giving in the image of Jesus' own once-and-for-all sacrifice. This is what the *General Instruction* calls their "force and spiritual significance." (n. 73).

It may be difficult to imagine how giving something like bread and wine back to God rehearses our own self-giving. One insight that may help comes from Latin American theologian, Enrique Dussel. He notes that Judaism teaches us to give gifts back to God because God has enabled us to receive these gifts from the good earth through the divine blessing of rain. But Jesus adds a new twist to this gift exchange, for he revealed that the face of God is reflected in the poor. Thus, in the image of Jesus, we make a return to God by offering our selves and our gifts to God through the poor.

The US Bishops made a similar point in their pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*, when they noted that our worship—especially the Eucharist—challenges Christians "to commit themselves to living as redeemed people with the same care and love for all people that Jesus showed...to work to heal the brokenness of society and human relationships and to grow in a spirit of self-giving for others" (n. 330). When we bring forward gifts of bread and wine as well as the gift of our own money (in slang sometimes called "bread") we symbolically announce our willingness to make a return to God, in part by being a people who respond to every kind of poverty and need in the world.

The Importance of the Procession of Gifts.

One of the rituals which makes the Mass quite different from Word and Communion Services is the procession of gifts. During the Mass people bring forward gifts of bread and wine; in Word and Communion services, however, the previously consecrated bread comes from the tabernacle. This is a very different sacramental act, which does not carry the same symbols of self-giving and sacrifice. Unfortunately, however, in many places a true

procession of the gifts at Mass is not done or its connection with communion minimized by bringing consecrated hosts to the altar from the tabernacle. Yet, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* notes that "it is most desirable that the faithful, just as the priest himself is bound to do, receive the Lord's Body from hosts consecrated at the same Mass and that in the instances when it is permitted, they partake of the chalice, so that even by means of the signs Communion will stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated" (#85)

In a procession of gifts, the fruit of the vine and work of human hands are prepared for offering back to God who graced us with such gifts in the first place. Here we begin ritualizing an obligating holy exchange. It is here that we also encounter Christ who identified the face of God with the poor, and modeled how every return to God in his name must exact justice from us. Thus the gifts brought forth are potent symbols of economic justice—the collaboration of God and human hands and creation—not for the satisfaction of a few, but the feeding of the many. This does not happen at communion rituals but at the celebration of the Mass. The procession of gifts is not a ritual we can afford to overlook.

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