

## The Meaning of the Mass – Part 3

### The Offertory Rites

The central event in the Offertory Rites, which comprise the very first actions of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, is the Offering of the Gifts. The gifts are brought forward as a representation of the whole assembly. They are your gifts being offered to the Lord. The gifts I am speaking of are first and foremost the bread and wine that will be used in the Eucharistic sacrifice. Now, we use the word “Sacrifice” a lot during the Mass and so it is important for us to understand it correctly. The word “Sacrifice” doesn’t mean to give up or throw away. Rather, it literally means to “Make Holy”. Only God can make something Holy, we can’t. And so a sacrifice is something we offer to God to be made holy by the Lord. Remember this meaning of Sacrifice as we reflect on the Offertory Rites of the Mass because **God only makes holy what we offer Him.**

The primary sacrifice we are intended to offer during this time of the Mass is the gift of our lives. St. Paul tells us in Romans 12:1 that we are to offer our very bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing, to God as the perfection of our spiritual worship. That means we offer to the Lord our whole lives to be made holy by Him. That’s more than just a check or a donation in the basket or a 10% tithe. It’s everything. Our whole life being given to God and placed on the altar. Jesus gave himself to us on the cross and now He is inviting us to give ourselves to the Lord so we can unite our lives with the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus himself. We are not perfect ... but Jesus is. And the Lord invites us to join our sacrifice to his sacrifice. One perfect, holy and pleasing offering to the Father. Wow – that’s so much more than a few bucks in the collection.

Think about this – if God makes holy what we offer Him then that also means that what we hold back and refuse to offer God isn’t made holy. How much of our lives do we hold back each week? **We wonder why we aren’t moved by God’s grace when we attend Mass - we get out of Mass what we put into it.** The offertory is when we put ourselves 100% into the Mass. Each of us should be making a conscious and complete offering of our lives to the Lord to be placed on the altar. Our individual lives are symbolized by the bread and wine we bring forth to be received by the priest as the representative of Christ himself. This sacrifice of our lives is secondarily, but necessarily, represented by donations of money. This collection is actually an important symbol of our practical willingness to share our lives both in love of God and also in love of our neighbor in need. As early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, St. Justin Martyr described the Mass and noted that the collection was to take place as a necessary and appropriate symbol of the spiritual offering of people’s lives to God at the same time the bread and wine were being presented as an offering.

Back to the primary gifts of God’s people which are both Bread and wine. Each of these has deep meaning. We have bread as the final product in a process that includes planting, harvesting, and baking. We have Wine as the final product in a process that includes growing, harvesting, and fermenting. Think of how many people are involved and how many years pass for these gifts. **They are both the gift of God and the fruit of human work.** They represent Nature and human ingenuity cooperating with each other. They symbolize what good things can happen when human beings cooperate with the Creator. The procession of the bread and wine further demonstrates the relationship between the Church and Jesus symbolized by the congregation and the priest. The Church bringing to the hands of Christ the fruits of creation crafted by the effort of human hands demonstrates the priesthood of the faithful which Christ shares with us in our Baptism. **The offering of the people is then united with the offering of Jesus who perfects all things when he presents it to the Father.** Christ takes our gifts and transforms them into his Body and Blood to become a continual offering in heaven -- the

eternal Paschal Sacrifice. Jesus can make our lives an adequate expression of himself - but it's up to us to offer ourselves to the Lord and beg that our offering be received.

There are some Additional "Little Mysteries" included in the Offertory Rites. One of those occurs when the priest or deacon mixes water with the wine. This was a common practice in the ancient world which illustrates our communion with the sacrifice of Christ as our humanity is joined to the divinity of Christ in the Eucharistic offering. For this reason, St. Cyprian said that we should never offer the wine without water since that would be like offering Christ without his people. The deacon or priest prays while the water and wine are mixed saying, "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." **If we haven't offered our lives then there is nothing of us to be joined to Christ's divinity.** Another is the washing of the hands - although this had practical origins, it quickly became something of deep spiritual significance as part of the priest's preparation to offer the most holy sacrifice of all - the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. The priest prays a prayer at this time, which everyone should pray with the priest so they can share in that sacrifice - "Wash me O Lord from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." We believe that Christ will now make the hands of the priest his own hands since there is only one priest, Jesus Christ, who acts through the ministry of each ordained priest. The hands that take these gifts, transform them, and offer them to the Father are the hands of Christ himself.

Finally, The Prayers of Presentation over the gifts states what the collection and offertory has expressed in action. The bread and wine are more than just elements of food and drink; as the priest reminds us, they are our very lives being offered to God - **"My sacrifice and yours". Our sacrifice is offered and accepted only through Christ.** This Prayer always mentions the gifts we have brought and prays for their transformation and ours. Saying "Amen" to this prayer means saying amen to all that has happened from the collecting of the gifts until this moment! It means saying "Amen" to the decision to give our lives to God 100%. It means saying "Amen" to the decision to love God and neighbor without holding back. It means saying "Amen" to being made holy and transformed by the Father to become the living presence of the Son. **All that happens not by accident, but because we make a decision, a petition, to offer our lives to God. The rest of the Mass, especially communion, will mean very little if we are not active participants in the offertory.** What we hold back from God, we hold back from His transforming grace. If Mass isn't changing us every time we attend, then maybe we are not praying the Offertory Rites very well.