

Understanding the Mass – The Offertory and Preparation of the Gifts

The second principle part of the Mass is the Liturgy of the Eucharist. It begins with the Offertory and concludes with the Prayer after Communion.

Today we will look at the Offertory and Preparation of Gifts. These actions may appear to some to be just a filler between the more significant moments of the Mass. However, they truly have profound meaning and purpose in and of themselves.

First, the Offertory is much more than a chance for the Church to take up a collection while everyone is together to pay the bills. It is really our response to what has happened so far in the Mass. We have come into the Lord's presence and heard him speak to us. We have professed our faith in him and entrusted to him our needs. We now respond to God's goodness by giving him our meager gifts so that the Lord Jesus can take them and offer them to the Father along with his life as a pleasing sacrifice on the altar.

We begin the Offertory by taking up the collection. In the early Church, this was the time to show true charity to brothers and sisters in Christ by providing for the needs of those who were poor. Today we don't bring food or clothing to share but our money to be given for the needs of the Church – to meet not only the material needs of others but the real spiritual needs of the family of God. In the simple gesture of putting something into the collection we are giving something of ourselves out of love for others. Money is our work - and hours of our lives. We pour ourselves out daily through our labors to make money and to keep it. Now we are offering it for the work of the Church – to carry on works of charity and evangelization on our behalf. What we give is now used for the salvation of souls and something eternal - so in a very real way our contributions build the kingdom of God here on earth.

Not everyone is able to put something into the collection but we are all to contribute at this time in the Mass. Together we offer bread and wine to be placed on the altar. These gifts are rich in symbolism. Taken from the earth, the bread and wine are the fruits of many grains of wheat and clusters of grapes that have been crushed and broken. They represent all our human labors and what it means to be human – all our trials and struggles but also all that is good, noble and filled with life. Bread and wine are food to nourish us and drink to bring us joy! In this common offering each of us are to give our very lives: all our prayers, works, joys and sufferings - all that we have and are - upon the altar with the Lord's gift of himself. Through these gifts we give ourselves as a living sacrifice to the Lord. During the Offertory music is played as we sing for joy that the Lord has allowed us this opportunity to give ourselves back to him.

The altar is then prepared and the gifts are brought forward. Taken from the people, the bread and wine are placed in the hands of the priest by the deacon who acts as a bridge between the people and the altar. The priest then offers prayers on our behalf, acting in the person of Christ as mediator between God and man. These prayers are rooted in the Sabbath and Passover prayers of the Jewish people of Christ's time. He gives thanks for the gifts, acknowledging that God is blessed by our gifts that have come from the earth and the work of our hands which he will now transform into our spiritual food and drink.

During this time the deacon (or in his absence, the priest) prepares the chalice by pouring in a little water with the wine. The original purpose of this action was to dilute the wine which, in the ancient world, was thick, to make it drinkable. In the liturgy, however, it has deeper meaning. As the wine and water are mixed the minister says “*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*”. This action and prayer symbolized the restoration of our poor humanity (symbolized by water) that is being joined to the divinity of Christ (symbolized by the wine). It also signifies the mixing of the blood and water that flowed from the side of Christ upon the Cross as signs of mercy and forgiveness for us.

Next the priest washes his hands, saying “*Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me of my sins*”. In some times and cultures, his hands would have been dirty from receiving the gifts. In the Mass, the real purpose is to take those hands and make them the hands of Christ, taking our simple offerings and making them a pleasing gift to the Father.

What we have in these external actions of the Offertory and Preparation of Gifts is gifts being prepared for a simple meal. But at a deeper level we are participating in the liturgy as we offer our lives through Christ to the Father in worship who is drawing us into his divinity to feed us with the food of eternal life.