

Reflections on the Mass

Reflection 6: The Liturgy of the Eucharist, Part I

The first major part of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word, with the Prayers of the Faithful is completed. After the Introductory Rites, we have been fed by the rich fare of the Scriptures, carefully selected by the Church for each Mass, first from the Lectionary, then from the Book of Gospels. The meaning of the readings and the application of their message in our lives have been expanded for us in the homily.

Now we enter the second major part of the Mass – the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Here we experience two ancient traditions - the Hebrew tradition of sacrifice offered to God, and the meal, or breaking of bread, which Jesus left as his memorial. We find that these two elements are woven together in the beautiful actions and prayers of the Eucharist. Today we will focus on preparations for the Eucharistic celebration and presentation of the gifts to be offered in that celebration.

Up to this point, all of the actions at the Mass have taken place away from the altar, either at the priest's chair or at the ambo. Everything now centers on the **altar** where the Eucharistic Sacrifice takes place. The altar is carefully prepared by the priest or deacon. We may recall the veneration of the altar, by a kiss, at the beginning of Mass. The care with which the altar is now prepared conveys appropriate reverence, indicating the importance of the actions about to occur. We see special linens: the **corporal**, upon which the Sacred Host and chalice are placed during the celebration of Mass, and a **purificator** used by the priest to purify his fingers, the **chalice** and **paten** after Holy Communion. We also see the **Missal** which is the priest's book of Mass prayers, and a cruet of water all carefully arranged in preparation for the presentation of the gifts. In parallel, it is now that we bring into clear focus our personal preparation – to link ourselves to Christ's sacrifice which is about to unfold and to the Eucharistic meal.

A key action is the procession, when members of the assembly bring the gifts of bread and wine to the altar, led by an altar server carrying

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a processional **crucifix**. These individuals represent all in the assembly, and their action in the procession calls all of us to prepare ourselves for the sacred celebration. This is very much a communal action. Its communal aspect is also reflected in the accompanying music. As the procession moves toward the altar, we all advance our hearts toward the Lord. We express our willingness to give of ourselves to God, and our monetary gifts presented along with the bread and wine acknowledge that everything we have is a gift from God. From our hearts, we offer our very selves to God at this time.

Once the gifts have been placed on the altar, the priest begins the prayers by blessing and praising God, acknowledging that we have received from God's goodness the gifts we offer to him. As he lifts the bread and then the chalice, the priest prays according to a formula modeled on a Jewish table prayer offered by the father of the family, praising God as the creator of the world. He reminds us that the gifts of bread and wine will become for us the bread of life and our spiritual drink. We all respond by saying, "*May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands, for the praise and glory of his name, for our good and the good of all his holy Church.*" We are not passive observers or mere spectators at this celebration. Rather, each of us is an integral part of the action. We are invited to full, conscious and active participation in the celebration - at this point and throughout the Mass.