

# V. Preparing the Gifts and our Hearts

This is the fifth in a series of eleven or so articles on the celebration of the Mass. Article #6 is entitled, "Lift Up Your Hearts"

The *Liturgy of the Eucharist* follows immediately after the Liturgy of the Word. It begins with its own introductory rite whose purpose is to prepare the Altar / Table and gifts, as well as the faithful, for this next part of Mass. The *Liturgy of the Eucharist* includes taking up our monetary gifts, a song during the preparatory rite, preparation of the Altar, and the presentation and preparation of the gifts.

## The Preparation of the Altar / Table

"At the beginning of the liturgy of the Eucharist the gifts, which will become Christ's Body and Blood, are brought to the altar.

First the altar, *the Lord's table*, which is the center of the whole liturgy of the Eucharist, is prepared:

The offerings are then brought forward. It is praiseworthy for the faithful to present the bread and wine, which are then accepted at an appropriate place by the priest or deacon who carries them to the altar." (GIRM 73)

First of all, the "table is set." That is, those elements needed to make the altar ready are prepared – the corporal, chalice, purificator, the Sacramentary, and the water. Next, the faithful bear the gifts of bread and wine to the Altar / Table in order that the gifts may be prepared for the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

## An Aside: Practical Reverence for the Altar

The revised *General Instruction* makes special provision for reverence to be shown to the Altar. It is good for us to recall here that, when a church is dedicated, the Altar is consecrated with an abundance of Sacred Chrism, the same oil used to confirm Christians. Since the Altar has been anointed, it symbolizes Christ, "the Anointed One."

The Altar has come to be a kind of catchall place to leave various and sundry items needed for worship. In many places, the Altar / Table is covered with cloths, candles, books, chalices, corporals, and other such things at the beginning of the liturgy. In other words, it is effectively prepared *before* it is to be used. The *General Instruction* sets forth the following norms regarding the Altar / Table:

- The Altar should be approachable from every side, not fixed against a wall. (GIRM 299)
- Candles (two are required) should be placed on or next to it. (GIRM 117, 307)
- Also on, or close to the Altar / Table, there is to be a cross with a figure of Christ crucified (It may also be carried in the Entrance Procession. GIRM 117, 308).
- Finally, the new directions also require the top Altar cloth to be white. This change does not mean that other colored cloths are prohibited but that the one on top needs to be white.

Because the minister places the Book of Gospels on the Altar at the conclusion of the entrance procession, some would say that the cloth to be used at the Liturgy of the Eucharist should *not* be laid on the Altar until the Preparation Rite. This notion implies that a more formal "setting of the table" is apropos for the Preparation Rite

## The Preparation of the Gifts – not the *Offertory*

It wasn't that long ago that this preparation time was known by many of us as *the Offertory*. This title has since been replaced by the term, *Preparation of the Gifts* because it is more theologically accurate to describe what is happening at this time of the Mass. For, the offering actually occurs during the Eucharistic Prayer.

"At the Last Supper

Christ instituted the paschal sacrifice and meal. Through this meal, the sacrifice of the cross is continuously made present in the Church...

For Christ took the bread and the cup and gave thanks; he broke the bread and gave it to his disciples, saying: 'Take, eat, and drink: this is my Body; this is the cup of my Blood. Do this in memory of me.'"

(GIRM 72)

Therefore, during this rite of preparation, the Church begins to do what Christ did at the Last Supper: 'he took bread, said the blessing, broke the bread and gave it to them.' Here, in the Preparatory Rite, we "take bread and wine..."

**The Liturgy of the Eucharist includes:**  
**Preparation of the Altar and Gifts**  
**Presentation of Gifts**  
**Prayer Over the Gifts**  
**The Eucharistic Prayer**  
**The Communion Rite**  
**The Prayer After Communion**

## The Presentation and Preparation of the Gifts

The ancient notion of "the Great Exchange" will help us understand better what takes place in the presentation of the gifts by the faithful.

“The Great Exchange”: God has first blessed us with the gift of creation. Humans take those gifts given, wheat and grapes, and, using our creativity, make bread and wine. Then, we bring those gifts we have received and labored over to present them at the Altar / Table that they might be transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. Finally, we receive them back in communion. The procession of the gifts says, in essence, “Behold the gifts God has given us!”

The priest says the proper prayers aloud *only* if there is no music during the preparation rite. Ideally at Sunday Mass there should be a hymn sung by the congregation or an anthem by a choir at this time. Thus, the only prayer that is usually audible at this part of the Mass is the invitation of the presider, “Pray my brothers and sisters...” followed by response of the faithful, “*May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands...*” The rite closes with the Prayer over the Offerings.

### **Assembly Stands at Prayer Over the Offerings**

The GIRM instructs the assembly to stand *at the beginning* of the priest’s invitation, “Pray my brothers and sisters that our sacrifice...” The people respond, “May the Lord accept...” It is appropriate to stand here, for every dialogue between presider and faithful in the liturgy, being one of mutuality and reciprocity, occurs while both stand. (GIRM 146)

It actually may take some time for priests and people to get grow accustomed to this change, which may seem awkward at first. Patience.

### **A Brief Word about the Collection**

The Collection is something more than a necessary evil, a practical response to the needs of the poor and needy, or a pragmatic activity to keep the parish and / or school running financially.

But, what is its spiritual connection to Mass? Certainly, more mature theological reflection needs to be brought to bear on this important action of the community to highlight its connection to the paschal mystery, the outpouring love of Christ before God.

*This is also the time to receive money or other gifts for the poor or the Church brought by the faithful or collected in the church. (GIRM 73)*

### **Points to Ponder about the Preparation Rite**

1) This part of the Mass was formerly called *the Offertory*. The name was changed to signify that the offering takes place in the Eucharistic Prayer.

2) Is it an altar or a table? Well, yes. The Church uses the term, “altar” more often than “table” in the *General Instruction*. But, it does use both terms to bring out different meanings of the altar / table’s use in liturgy. Notice the following statement:

“The *altar* on which the sacrifice of the cross is made present under sacramental signs *is also the table* of the Lord at which the people of God are called together to participate in the Mass.”  
(GIRM 296)

a) “Altar” focuses our attention on the sacrificial aspect of the Mass; “Table” highlights Jesus table fellowship with sinners *then*, and points to the great and final banquet with God in heaven *now*.

3) Most Roman Catholic parishes use hosts or wafers for the eucharistic bread because they are efficient, inexpensive, and last a long time when reserved in the tabernacle. However, some communities, in response to the several directives noted below, have opted to bake homemade or *substantial* bread (that looks like bread).

a) The *General Instruction* insists that 1) bread should be recently baked; 2) have the appearance of bread; and 3) be able to be broken. The use of unleavened bread help the Church maintain a symbolic connection with our Jewish brothers and sisters who use such bread at Passover.

The bread for celebrating the Eucharist must be made only from wheat, *recently baked*, and, according to the ancient tradition of the Latin Church, be unleavened. (GIRM 320)

The meaning of the sign demands that the material for the eucharistic celebration *truly have the appearance of food...*  
[yet] small hosts are in no way ruled out.  
*The action of the breaking of the bread, the simple term for the Eucharist in apostolic times, will more clearly bring out the force and importance of the sign of unity of all in the one bread and of the sign of charity, in that the one bread is distributed among brothers and sisters. (GIRM 321)*

### **For discussion/reflection:**

- How do the actions done during the Preparation of the Gifts truly prepare me for what follows? What might help me better enter into the action?
- What does the Collection of monetary gifts mean to me? To my community? What does it have to do with the paschal mystery?
- Bread and wine connect me to all creation as gifts of God. Who are those who labored to make wheat into bread and grapes into wine? How am I connected to them by the Preparation of Gifts?

### **Points to Ponder about the Preparation Rite**

These paragraphs were excised on 9/24/03

In the Western Church, unleavened bread has been mandated for use at Mass since about the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Such usage finds its roots in the Jesus' Last Supper, a Passover Meal, that employed unleavened bread as commanded by God in Exodus 12.

An interesting historical note is that the Eastern Orthodox Church continues to use leavened bread, meaning to signify that Christ's death and resurrection has replaced the demands of the Law. Christ is our new leaven. Western use of unleavened bread continues to be a sticking point in dialogue with the Eastern Church.