



Understanding the Mass

Part 3

Preparing the Altar and Gifts

In Between Time

The movement between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist requires a moment of transition. At a dinner party, there is ultimately a moment when the host invites those gathered to move from the living room to the dining table. At Mass, this transition must happen as well—though the transition doesn't involve us changing our seats.

Setting the Table of the Lord, the Altar

When a church is consecrated or a new altar is installed in a church, the altar must be consecrated. The beautiful rite of consecrating an altar requires that the bishop anoint the altar with Sacred Chrism, the Christ oil. As such the altar bears the presence of Christ, the "anointed One."

For this reason, only those things needed for the celebration of the Mass should ever be placed upon the altar. Those items are:

The Book of the Gospel—at the beginning of Mass, the Book of the Gospel is placed on the altar to signify the connection between the Word and the Eucharist.

The Altar Cloth—the Roman Missal requires that one white altar cloth cover at least the top of the altar (the mensa). If a second cloth is used, it may be white or a festive or seasonal color. Prior Missals required three cloths with the one in between being a cerecloth (a linen cloth imbedded with wax) so that a spill of the Precious Blood could be easily cleaned.

The Corporal—a corporal is a square linen cloth onto which is placed the prepared ciborium (container for the hosts) and chalice (cup for the wine/Precious Blood). Corporals are usually marked with a cross and are ironed in such a way that when folded, any particles of the Blessed Sacrament are contained within.

The Purificator—a purificatory is another linen cloth, rectangular in shape, that is used to wipe the chalice. It is likewise marked with a cross and ironed in a particular manner so as to fit across the top of a chalice. Along with the corporal, a purificator, which may have absorbed the Precious Blood, are purified by being soaked in the sacrarium (a special sink in the sacristy that drains directly into the earth instead of the sewer system). After having been soaked, they may be machine washed and then ironed by hand.

The Pall—a pall is square of dense paper or plastic that is covered with linen and often decorated. It is used to cover the chalice during the celebration of Mass so as to prevent insects or debris from falling into the chalice.

The Chalice Veil and Burse—the paten (plate for the large host used by the priest) and chalice are assembled in a particular manner. The purificator is placed over the chalice; the paten is placed on top of the purificator. The pall is then placed over the paten. A veil, usually made of fabric that matches the priest's vestments or the altar cloth, is placed over the chalice and paten. On top is placed a burse - a square "pocket" covered with linen and usually decorated - into which is placed the corporal.

Candles—out of reverence for the altar which is Christ, candles are placed on or near the altar. At least two candles are required. More may be used in accord with the solemnity of celebration. When the bishop visits a parish church, a seventh candle is added. The tradition of adding a seventh candle is of unknown origin but likely relates to "fullness" as expressed in the days of the week, the Sacraments and even to the Jewish seven-branched menorah.

The Roman Missal and Stand—the prayers for the entire Liturgy are found in the Roman Missal. It therefore must be placed on the altar for the celebration of Mass. In accord with the presiders preference, a stand may be used so that he can see the texts more clearly.

The Collection and Presentation of the Gifts

Following the Prayer of the Faithful, the assembly is seated and an Offertory Song or an instrumental piece is played. An offertory collection is taken among the faithful—these monetary offerings are gifts from our work and so represent us. They are used for the support of the Church, its mission and the care of the poor. Once completed, the monetary offering along with the bread and wine, also works of human hands that represent us, are brought to the sanctuary in procession. Like other processions in the Liturgy, this again is a moment for the assembly to be united as their offerings and individual intentions are brought to the Lord.

This is a significant moment in the Liturgy because, as noted above, the gifts brought to the altar symbolize us humans. The bread and wine, made by human hands which nourish us in our daily lives, are presented and transformed into Body and Blood of Christ, meaning that we too are transformed. And then they are given to us as Holy Communion to effect that transformation—that we, indeed, may become what we receive.

For this reason, aside from the monetary collection, only bread and wine are presented in the presider. Water or flowers are not made by human hands, they are already divine gifts, so they do not represent us. Empty vessels are not transformed in the Liturgy and so should not be included in the presentation of the gifts.

Preparation of the Chalice

The ciboria and hosts are placed adjacent to the corporal while the chalice is prepared. The priest or deacon adds a drop of water to the chalice while praying: *by the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbles Himself to share in our humanity.* Water, a divine gift, here represents Christ who, by the mystery of the Incarnation, joined in our humanity, represented by the wine—a work of human hands.

This ritual dates to a time when water needed to be added to the wine which was stored in concentrated form so as to make it drinkable. As with many practical things in the Liturgy, the action was given religious meaning.

Prayers of the Priests Over the Gifts

After the deacon, or the priest himself, has prepared the chalice, the presider quietly prays over the ciborium or paten: *Blessed are You, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer: fruit of the earth and work of human hands, it will become for us the bread of life.* To which, if there is no music, the people respond *Blessed be God for ever.* A similar prayer is prayed over the chalice: *Blessed are You, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the wine we offer You: fruit of the vine and work of human hands, it will become our spiritual drink.* Again, the people respond: *Blessed be God for ever.*

The priest then bows and silently prays: *With humble spirit and contrite heart may we be accepted by You, O Lord, and may our sacrifice in your sight this day, be pleasing to You, Lord God.* The priest then turns and washes his hands while saying: *Wash me, O Lord, from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.*

Again the action of the priest washing his hands is rooted in the time when actual gifts were presented (the bread, wine, animals, fruits, vegetables, etc...). His hands, being dirty, needed washing. When such things were no longer presented, the hand washing took on spiritual significance taken from Psalm 51 which recounts David's unworthiness before God.

The Prayer Over the Gifts

As the priest calls upon the assembly to pray: *pray my brothers and sisters that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.* The people respond: *May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands, for the glory and praise of his name, for our good and the good of all His holy Church.*

The assembly, now standing, are ready to hear the prayer prayed over the gifts which unites the actions, prayers and gestures into a single prayer that offers the bread and wine.