

Year of the Eucharist

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The Year of the Eucharist
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The Structure of the Mass The Liturgy of the Eucharist The Preparation of the Gifts

When we invite guests into our home to share a meal, we usually have the table prepared before they arrive, or at least we make that an attempt. At a family meal, however, often the members of the family share the tasks of placing the table cloth, bringing plates, knives and forks, napkins, candles, and then placing the food on the table. Before we begin, we give thanks to God for all that is provided.

Likewise, at Mass it is members of the family who prepare the needed items and bring them to the table: the altar cloth, the corporal, the purificators, the Missal and chalice.

While the table is being prepared, members of the assembly are reaching into pockets and purses to place a monetary gift into the basket as it is passed from one to another. The many gifts will be gathered together and presented to the presider with the gifts of bread and wine.

Then other members of the assembly – the family -- carry these gifts in procession to the altar. The bread and wine are placed on the altar and the other gifts are put in a suitable place away from the Eucharistic table. These gifts of bread and wine, money and, sometimes other gifts for the poor or for the church, are not the only offering we make at this time.

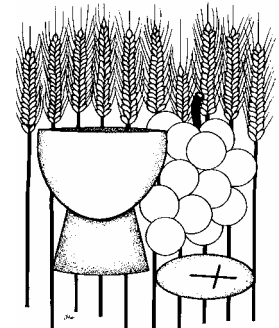
The gifts we gather together and bring to the altar are needed for the liturgy and for the mission of the Church. But they are more than that. They are symbols of all of us, of our time and our lives, of our life's work, and of our hearts seeking to be open and generous. As the gifts are being prepared and presented, we take this time to prepare ourselves to once again be offered, presented to God.

The priest may incense the gifts and then incense the cross and altar. This ritual act – the smell of the incense and the sight of it rising – is a beautiful symbol of our offering and our prayer rising in the sight of God. The priest and the people may also be incensed by the deacon or another minister.

The deacon – and if there is no deacon, the priest – prepares the gifts. He pours a symbolic amount of water into the wine. In the ancient world, the texture of wine was very thick so water was customarily added to wine to dilute it both in secular and in religious settings. Later this action was seen as a symbol of the hypostatic union, that is, the total union of both a human and a divine nature in Christ. Today we see this mingling of water and wine as symbolic of the people being united to Christ.

The Washing of Hands is another symbolic gesture. Unlike the washing of hands for cleanliness outside of Mass, historically, the priest washed his hands to signify the need for inner purity. It is meant to be a symbolic, private action and that is why it is done off to the side with little attention drawn to it.

As we watch, as we make our monetary contribution, as we listen, we too know our need to be “washed.” With the priest, we desire inner purity as we prepare to receive Christ in the Eucharist. This is a busy moment in the liturgy, one that might require added interior discipline to fully participate. Music, whether sung by the choir, the assembly, or played on instruments alone, is a wonderful aid to keeping our attention focused on the rich symbols which speak to us of our own preparation, cleansing, and offering of ourselves to God.



FROM THE INTRODUCTION TO THE ORDER OF MASS

#105 “The procession with the gifts is a powerful expression of the participation of all present in the Eucharist and in the social mission of the Church.

It is an expression of the humble and contrite heart, the dispossession of self that is necessary for making the true offering, which the Lord Jesus gave his people to make with him.

The procession with the gifts expresses also our eager willingness to enter into the “holy exchange” with God: ‘accept the offerings you have given us, that we in turn may receive the gift of yourself.’ ”

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