

A SCHOOL'S GUIDE TO THE OFFERTORY

WHAT IS THIS?

The procession with the gifts symbolises the assembly's participation in the Eucharist and in the social mission of the Church.

It is an expression of the humble and contrite heart, a giving of self in readiness for making the true offering which the Lord Jesus invites his people to make with him. The procession with the gifts expresses also our willingness to enter into a holy exchange with God: by offering to God what he has given to us we may merit to receive Christ's very self.

PARTICIPATION IN THE MASS

The renewal of the Liturgy that the Church called for at Vatican Council II had at its heart full and active participation at the Liturgy by all the faithful.

The phrase much used at the time was that people were being encouraged not so much to pray at Mass but to learn how to pray the Mass. The same challenge lies before us all today and for clergy, catechists, and parents the challenge is how to teach our children to pray the Mass.

Maybe the best analogy is that we are invited to learn to contemplate the actions, symbols and readings of the Mass. 'What do the readings say to me?' 'How do I respond to Jesus feeding me today with his Body and Blood?' 'How does all this relate to my daily life?'

This is full, active and conscious participation. We should know this before we come to Mass. The priest should alert us to this during Mass; likewise, the hymns we sing, and prayers we say.

Simply giving people 'things to do' is no replacement for this. Children can, of course, minister at Mass but what is most important is that they learn to participate - and that we know the difference!

WHAT SHOULD BE BROUGHT IN THIS PROCESSION?

Only those elements of bread and wine to be used in the celebration of the Eucharist or money to be given to relieve the needs of the Church and the poor.

In other words, the only things to be brought in this procession are:

- bread;
- wine;
- any collection of money or other things taken for Church and the poor (before or during the Mass).

This procession is to focus on the very heart of the Liturgy and on the very heart of the life of the Church, i.e. her living in charity.

Other things used at the altar, e.g. water, chalices, purificators and towel, belong on the credence table. They should never be brought in procession. They do not have symbolic importance comparable to the bread, wine, and offerings. Only these three things belong in this procession.

BUT....

Many schools have used this moment in the Mass for a procession of symbols of, for example, the achievements of a school or a class; or have used it to give pupils 'something to do during the Mass'.

In both cases this distorts what the Liturgy is and means. This time in the Mass is not the time for us to focus on our achievements. It is precisely the time when we focus most intimately on what Christ achieves for us.

There is nothing wrong - and often everything right - in marking our achievements and our identity at Mass, but the place for doing it is while we are gathering, i.e. in the entrance procession. Then the symbols are received and placed as a reminder throughout the Mass of who we are and why we are here.

SYMBOLS OF CHRIST, SYMBOLS OF US

In the Orthodox tradition the bread and the wine of the Offertory procession have been venerated almost as though they were already the Body and Blood of Christ that they will soon become.

In our Western tradition we reverence these elements too. Like all of Creation they find their fulfilment in Christ, as is made explicit in their offering at Mass. But in our tradition the elements are mainly seen as symbols of us. Human hands that have prepared these offerings of bread and wine. We have taken the wheat and grape of God's creation and transformed it into work of human hands, which now we offer to God.

St Augustine wrote beautifully on this: 'Bread is not made from one grain, but from many. It's as though you who were many were ground. When you were baptised it's as though you were mixed into dough. When you received the fire of the Holy Spirit, it's as though you were baked. Be what you can see, and receive what you are. After all, just as many grains are mixed into one loaf in order to produce the visible appearance of bread, as though what Holy Scripture says about the faithful were happening: "They had one soul and one heart in God" (Acts 4:32); so too with the wine. Brothers and sisters, just remind yourselves what wine is made from; many grapes hang in the bunch, but the juice of the grapes is poured together in one vessel.'

There's a lot in this teaching to deepen our appreciation of the meaning of the symbols of bread and wine, and a lot to refresh how we speak with the pupils and students on these things.

BREAD AND WINE FOR CONSECRATION - PRAYERS AND NEEDS TO PRESENT TO GOD

If, as St Augustine suggests, the bread and wine symbolise us - baptised and consecrated to God in Christ and by the Spirit - it is no bad thing for us to make these symbols still more potent by consciously and deliberately associating the detail of our lives with the symbols of bread and wine.

Already these symbols represent our humanity redeemed by Christ. Let us also deliberately and consciously associate our troubles and difficulties with the elements being brought to the altar. Let these concerns and challenges be associated with Christ's Paschal Mystery, his Passion, Death and Resurrection. We associate our fears and frailties with his triumph over human fears and weaknesses, so that they might come before the transcendent love of the Father which, as it raised Jesus from the dead, so too it may reach out to us with healing and encouragement, hope and the promise of new and eternal life.

Again, it is through the owning of and the using of the symbols of the Liturgy that these ancient symbols become fruitful for us, and that we best participate in them.