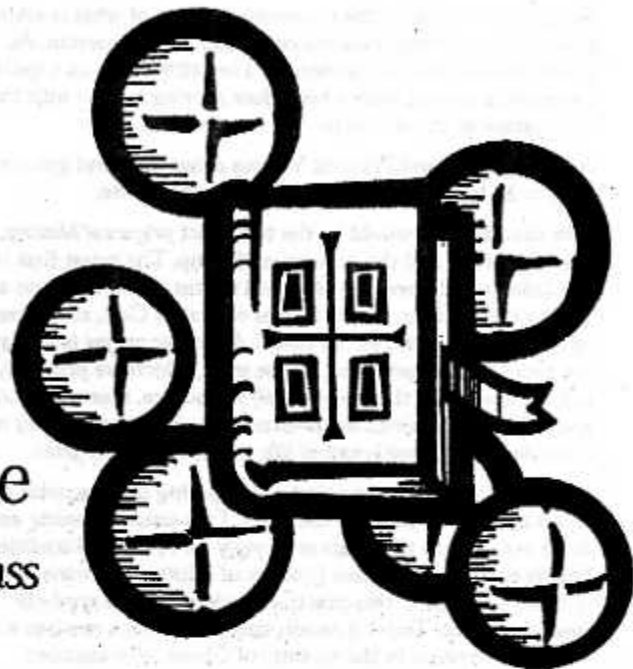


Give Thanks and Praise

A Popular Explanation of the Mass



Part 7

The Liturgy of the Eucharist (b)

Preparation of the Gifts

The family table ranks among the most important pieces of furniture found in the home, even more important than the TV set. The table is the place from which we eat our meals. It is a place around which we gather to talk while sipping coffee. It is a place around which we often focus our lives as a family.

What the table is to the family, the altar is to the Christian community. This piece of church furniture is, in the words of our bishops, "the common table of the assembly, a symbol of the Lord. . . it is holy and sacred to this assembly's action and sharing" (*Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, no. 71).

To set the table and to prepare the food are important, even though preparatory, aspects of every meal. The same is true for the eucharistic meal. We first prepare the altar and the gifts placed upon it—this is the purpose of the first and introductory part of the eucharistic celebration, i.e., the preparation of the gifts.

Many of us grew up calling this section of the Mass the "Offertory." And yet the real offering to the Father occurs during the eucharistic prayer. To bring out this truth the Church now uses the title "preparation of the gifts" as better describing the true function of the rite, namely to prepare for what is to come.

Although the preparation rite contains a number of individual elements, the following are especially significant:

Preparation of the Altar.

Presentation of the Gifts.

Concluding Prayer over the Gifts.

Preparation of the Altar: This might be called "setting the table." As a functional task, the action is done with simplicity and yet with a dignity and reverence befitting the solemnity of the occasion. The deacon or another assisting minister places the sacramentary (the book containing the prayers prayed by the priest) on the altar. Then a square piece of white cloth (the corporal) is placed on the altar. Finally a folded cloth (napkin) called the purificator is placed to the right of the corporal. The preparation of the altar is a sign that something new is beginning. It is a sign that we are making ready to begin the eucharistic celebration.

Presentation of the Gifts: One of the most ancient customs of the Church is that of the people themselves providing bread and wine as well as other gifts to be used in the celebration as well as afterwards. Many of the early writers stress the importance of each person bringing the gift of bread which, when transformed, would be received back by the communicant.

The bread and the wine are symbols of ourselves, our work, our stewardship of God's creation. The desire of the Church is that the bread, while remaining unleavened (a tradition in the western Church since the early Middle Ages), should nonetheless be of such texture and quality that we can experience it as real bread. Monetary gifts are also presented. These are used not only for the needs of the community but also, as the rubrics state, "for the poor." Many parishes set aside a portion of the money collected for needs of the community at large. Thus the collection and presentation of the gifts is an expression of the whole assembly's participation in the eucharist and in the social ministry of the Church.