

Archbishop Etienne has declared this to be a Year of the Eucharist. And one of the things I would like to do to mark this year is to teach about the mass. In our Gospel we hear of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. This is not the Eucharist, but it is a foreshadowing of it. So, I want to take one facet of this event and use it to explain what is happening at a small part of the mass. If you want a good book to help with this, I recommend What Happens at Mass, by Abbot Jeremy Driscoll, OSB, Abbot of Mount Angel. I will use it in my talks.

“Five loaves and two fish are all we have here.’ Then [Jesus] said, ‘Bring them here to me.’” Jesus then miraculously multiplies these gifts and feeds the multitudes. With these verses as a foundation I want to discuss today what is called The Offertory Rite. This is the part of the mass from the collection to the prayer after the priest washes his hands. It doesn’t seem very important does it? Kind of an intermission. But it has depth. It’s Jesus asking each of us for our own loaves and fish.

Let's begin with the collection itself – what's going on there? From the earliest surviving description of the mass, by St. Justin Martyr c.150, we know there has always been a collection at the mass. This has a practical side, but it's not just about paying the bills. We need to think of the collection as not only the money, but also as the bread and wine. Money just represents the work and sacrifice of our lives that buys the bread and wine. And the collection includes each person at the mass no matter what you put in the basket. Our whole lives, symbolized by the bread and wine and money, are being collected here to be offered as a sacrifice to God.

The mass is a sacrifice. This is not the ancient sacrifice of sheep and bulls at the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus brings a new covenant with a new sacrifice. St. Paul in Rom 12:1 says, "I urge you . . . by the mercies of God to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship." The new sacrifice is not animals, but Christians offering themselves to God by living a holy life.

So, giving oneself to God as a living sacrifice is what the collection is about.

To understand this, we need to trace back the earthly roots of the bread and wine. The wheat for the bread was planted in a field, sprouted, was cared for by farmers, harvested. It was then ground into flour and baked. Something similar happens for the wine. Vines are planted and cared for, grapes are picked, and real skill is needed by the vintner to turn the grape juice into wine. My point is: many people are involved, the seasons and earth too. These symbols of bread and wine are not purely natural, they involve human beings to make them – a cooperation between God and us.

This is why at the Offertory the priest holds up the bread and wine and prays, “Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you: fruit of the earth and work of human hands.” “Blessed are you, Lord of all creation.

For through your goodness we have received the wine we offer you:
fruit of the vine and work of human hands.”

These gifts we bring to God for the altar remind us that we're not animals that graze, looking for our food alone. We produce food together and we eat it together. One of the hard parts of the coronavirus is that it's now hard to eat meals with friends. We miss that because such meals are a kind of communion. Food and drink are substances we need to live, but also symbols we need to stay human.

These are the gifts that are gathered outside the church but then are brought up the aisle by the laity at the Offertory Procession and given into the hands of the priest, who represents Christ. These gifts are then lifted up to the Father by Christ in the person of the priest, thanking Him for all He has given us. But our gifts are hardly equal to the graces received. We bring all we have, but it is never enough to repay what God does for us. Remember the five loaves and two fish. Jesus will use our little offerings and multiply them infinitely. Jesus will

turn the bread and wine into His Body and Blood that He offers to the Father in the Eucharistic Prayer later in the mass.

Two other small rituals are part of the Offertory. Putting water in the wine. “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to hare in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” Natural action of dilution, but also a theological reminder since St. Cyprian, 3rd century. Through the mass humanity is joined to God.

Washing of priest’s hands. There’s a natural need after handling gifts. But also, “Wash me, O Lord, from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.” Now Jesus will make the hands of the priest His own hands because there is only one Priest. And Christ will lift up these gifts to the Father using the hands of the priest as His own.

The priest, returning to the altar after washing his hands, invites the people to, “Pray that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.” The Offertory ends with the priest praying

the Prayer over the Gifts that always mentions the gifts brought up in the collection and asks God for their and our transformation into Him.

Notice: through the prayer of Jesus (prayed by the priest), our gifts, representing our lives -- we ourselves -- become the Word made flesh. The gifts of the offertory will become the Body and Blood of Christ. So, it's literally true that we offer up our lives to God in the gifts we bring to the altar. The mass is always about us being transformed into Jesus, the sharing in the life of God.

Next time the ushers ask you to take up the gifts for the offertory, don't refuse. Don't worry that you'll trip, or your clothes aren't good enough. Accept. It is a great honor.

We find the mass boring only if we do not know how to pray the mass. How might we pray during the offertory rite? One way is to remember that at the offertory we bring our lives, all our efforts to love, share, create – all that's going on in our lives that week – and so we mentally put them into the hands of Christ. Tell Jesus exactly what

you are offering this week from your life. In doing that we are saying to Jesus, take these, my five loaves and two fish, and do something marvelous with them. "Make my life into what your life was and is."