

THE SPIRIT OF THE LITURGY

PART 3 OF 5

FEBRUARY 9, 2020

THE PRESENTATION OF GIFTS

The image is separated from us by more than 1,600 years, but it is still instantly recognizable: three travelers, cloaks blowing in the wind, stride towards the seated figure of a mother with a child in her arms. This carving from a 4th-century Roman sarcophagus is one of the earliest depictions of the story of the magi, recounted in The Gospel of Matthew. Wise men from far away see a star in the sky, and travel all the way to Bethlehem to worship a newborn king. They present him with symbolic offerings of gold, frankincense, and myrrh—gifts that suggest kingship, divinity, and sacrifice. Then they return home “by another way” (Mt 2:12), changed by their encounter with the child of Bethlehem.

The magi come into their own at Christmas, of course. They are featured in our carols and nativity sets, on ornaments and Christmas cards. (We might even write their initials in chalk over our doors at Epiphany!) But we would do well to remember the Magi, those first gift-givers, every time we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, because their journey to Christ is echoed in the presentation of the gifts at every Mass.

An ancient tradition

In the earliest accounts of the liturgy, this presentation of gifts stands out as an important part of the Mass, a great procession in which all the faithful participated. People brought bread prepared at home and wine from their own tables. They brought gifts of money. Sometimes they brought oil, cheese, olives, milk, honey, and other goods as well! A description of the papal Mass in Rome from the year 700 describes the whole assembly coming forward to the altar with gifts of various kinds. The deacons were on hand to receive and sort the gifts. Everyone, from choristers to the Pope himself, brought an offering.

Obviously, much more bread and wine would be presented than could be used at a single Eucharist. Some of the gifts made their way to the altar; others served the needs of the clergy. The largest portion, however, was distributed among the poor.

With time, this ritual action—which must have been lengthy and quite complex—faded from use. The bread and wine were simply brought from the side table by the altar servers, or even placed on the altar before Mass began. People still made their financial offerings, of course; but the intimate link with the celebration of the



ABOVE: The Magi present their gifts in a 4th-century sarcophagus inscription, now in the Vatican Museums. BELOW: Children dressed as the Three Kings present gifts during Mass at St. Peter's Basilica on January 1, 2015 (CNS Photo, Paul Haring). The Magi were the first to bring gifts to the infant Christ, the expression of their homage and worship. At every Mass, we have that same privilege, bringing before God the “fruit of the earth and work of human hands” (Roman Missal).

Eucharist was lost.

With the renewal of the liturgy following the Second Vatican Council, this important moment for the participation of the faithful was restored and expanded. “Even though the faithful no longer bring from their own possessions the bread and wine intended for the liturgy as was once the case, nevertheless the rite of carrying up the offerings still keeps its spiritual efficacy and significance” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 73). In the liturgy as we celebrate it today, representatives of the parish community bring forward the bread and wine, as well as financial contributions, at every Mass. At least a few times a year, especially on Holy Thursday, the entire assembly joins the procession forward to the altar with their gifts for the Church and for the poor.

Layers of meaning

The presentation of the gifts is rich in meaning. In this part of the Mass, the divine and the human meet: the bread and wine, “fruit of the earth and work of human hands,” are placed on the altar, where they will become the Body and Blood of Christ. God receives our simple gifts, only to return them to us transformed into something infinitely more precious: the very presence of the Godhead. The liturgy highlights this holy exchange in the silent prayer that is said as the priest or deacon adds a little water to the wine: “By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity” (Roman Missal). In every Mass, the Word becomes flesh, and makes his dwelling among us.

Participation in the presentation of gifts is closely linked with participation in the Eucharist itself; the two processions are like two sides of the same coin. In the early Church, only the baptized were allowed to bring forward their gifts. The non-baptized were not to bring an offering until the day of their baptism. To bring forward the gifts was to begin to participate in the Body and Blood of Christ.

The presentation of gifts is also intimately linked with the Christian call to share with the poor. Thus St. Cyprian of Carthage (c.200-258) scolded a wealthy woman who came to the Eucharist but made no offering of her own: “You are rich and well-to-do; yet you think you celebrate the Lord’s Supper even though you... come to it without an offering and receive a part of the offering brought by a poor person. Consider the widow in the gospel.” The same holds true today. Eucharist and charity go hand in hand.

Praying the procession of gifts

During this part of the Mass which comes between the two great movements of the liturgy, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, it can sometimes feel like we are just waiting for “the exciting part” to begin. But this is a special time of prayer and preparation for Christ’s coming to us in the Eucharist, with a meaning and purpose all its own. Like the Magi of old, we journey into the presence of Christ, bearing such gifts as we have to offer. In the words of Christina Rossetti’s wonderful poem:

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.
(Christina Rossetti, In the Bleak Midwinter)

What is the spirit of the liturgy? It is a spirit of offering and gift—self-offering, self-gift.

—Corinna Laughlin, *Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy*



First communicants present the gifts of bread and wine during Mass in the Cathedral. Participation in the procession of gifts is intimately linked to participation in the communion procession.

A Quiet Prayer at the Preparation of the Gifts

Lord Jesus,
as the altar is prepared,
prepare me to celebrate this Eucharist
with an attentive mind and a receptive heart.
Draw me closer to you
and to my brothers and sisters
in this shared prayer.

As the collection is taken,
open my eyes to the needs around me
and show me how to share my substance with others.

As the bread is brought forward,
receive all I have accomplished this week
as my offering to you.

As the wine is poured out,
receive the failure, pain, and suffering of my life
and transform them.

As the water and wine are mingled,
make me more like you,
so that the Holy Spirit may have room to act in me.

As the priest washes his hands,
I ask you to bless him and all priests.
Make them worthy servants of your mysteries,
and faithful ministers to your holy people. Amen.

*May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands,
for the praise and glory of his name, for our good
and for the good of all his holy Church.*