

HOMILY SERIES III Preparation of the Gifts

Tony: Today we continue with our series on the Mass.

The first part of the Mass consisted of the Gathering of the Community and Listening to the Word. Now we turn to the second part of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

We just heard Jesus say, "Give to God what belongs to God." And what belongs to God? EVERYTHING. So what can we give God? That is what this part of the Mass is all about, giving back to God.....

Giving our thanks, giving our praise, giving ourselves, giving our gifts. And God takes our gifts and gives to us Himself in the Holy Eucharist.

Rose: Just a little background....The first followers of Jesus were Jews, who kept the Sabbath, kept the Jewish laws, and had community meals on Friday night.

So after the resurrection, when they gathered, those who believed in Jesus, remembered him by breaking bread and sharing a cup of wine in his memory. They believed that Jesus was present in their midst in that holy bread and cup of wine. They were following his command. "Do this in Memory of Me." How did that simple meal become the Mass we know today?

Tony: One of the things that happened was a division in the Jewish community in the year 70. Those who believed in Jesus were no longer welcome in the synagogue. So they would gather not on the Sabbath, Saturday...but on Sunday, to show they were raised with Christ. They would gather at some person's house, large enough to accommodate the growing community. Soon even those houses became too small and larger meeting halls were needed. By the 4th century processions were added. What was the procession all about?

Rose: The whole congregation would participate in the procession. They would bring to the table bread and wine for the Eucharist, but would also bring candles, incense, perhaps fruit, or meat. Singing would accompany the procession and the priest would receive the gifts. He would use what was needed for the Mass and distribute the rest to the needy of the community. By the 11th century, the congregation grew so large that a collection of money replaced the bringing up of items. But we still bring up bread and wine. And we use unleavened bread? Why is that?

Tony: Bread and wine was used at the last Supper, reminding us of the Passover Meal. When the Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt, Moses led them through the Red Sea and across the desert to the Promised Land. They left in a hurry and the bread did not have time to rise. That event was to be remembered forever every spring at Passover time... ..the night God saved his people from slavery. And that was the meal that Jesus celebrated on the night before he died. That is why we use that same kind of bread.....unleavened.

Rose: (go to center aisle, Tony to step) Let's walk through the procession.

The gifts we bring to the altar....the bread,.....the wine represent ourselves. Showing they come from us, we have people bring them to the altar. They are the work of our hands and the fruit of our earth. They symbolize us. It is as though we are placing ourselves in this plate of bread and pitcher of wine. So in a sense, we are the gifts, and we place ourselves on the altar. And we bring another gift to the altar.....the collection of our money. Because we want to be included in this gift, we pass a basket. Let us all join in the offering by taking the basket and passing it on. So even if you contribute in another way, we ask that you touch the basket to show you are offering yourself.

Tony: Our money represents ourselves....it is the work of our hands, our minds, our bodies. Our money supports the work of St. Thomas Aquinas and helps those in need and today we are also remembering the missions. We all can't leave our homes and go to a mission land so we give our money to support those who give their lives to spread God's word. Our parish is supported by your voluntary contributions and we thank you so that our work can continue.

Once the bread and wine are brought to the altar, what happens next?

Rose: (Tony at altar) Father uses two blessing prayers that were used at the Jewish Sabbath meal, perhaps even the same words Jesus used at the Last Supper as he blessed the bread and wine. He holds the bread: "Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you: fruit of the earth the work of human hands. It will become for us the bread of life. " Then before you offer the wine, I notice you put a little water into the wine. Why is that?

Tony: This has been done since the 11th century. We put water into the wine to show that we (our humanity) join with Christ's divinity. Once water mixes with the wine it is lost in the new substance. We are one with Christ in his offering.

Rose: You then hold up the wine and pray again, "blessed are you... we have this wine to offer, fruit of the vine and work of our hands. It will become our spiritual drink." After you offer the wine, you wash your hands. This gesture has been part of the liturgy since the beginning. It was a practical matter because often the gifts included fresh fish and live chickens. But now it is only symbolic of an inward cleansing.

Tony: The next prayer is to invite all present to pray that God will accept our gifts. Remember the gifts we are offering stand for ourselves. What do we have to offer to God today? We bring our hearts, we bring our worries and fears, we bring our love and all that we are.

Rose: The whole community is now ready to take part in the Eucharistic prayer. It is not Fr. Tony's prayer, it is our prayer. He speaks for us to God the Father. It is our prayer of thanks to God for all his blessings and in particular for sending us his Son Jesus. Our gifts are on the altar. Our lives are on the altar. And all are about to be changed into the Body of Christ. But we'll talk of that next time.