

BOOK THREE:
OFFERTORY

Chapter xxiv: *The Offertory is begun*

IT SEEMS LIKE AN AGE, but in it is really only a few seconds, since the sermon finished. Along with the sermon, there ended, a few seconds ago, the whole huge second movement of the Mass, the part concerned with words: Bible readings, Creed, and sermon itself. During this wordy second movement, we largely sat or stood still, meditating on great words. Now the third movement begins, and we turn active.

When the preacher says *Amen!* to show that he has finished his stuff, it is as if an ant-nest has been kicked. He comes down out of the pulpit with vigour, and the whole body of the faithful – sacred ministers, servers and people – erupt into motion. Today's still photograph of the Mass catches the moment when the preacher returns to the sanctuary: everyone leaps up, the deacon and subdeacon swoop together, the three sacred ministers course on up to the altar. Words are done with; here comes the thing itself, the climactic section of Mass, the offering and eating of the Divine Man. The feast is upon us and the table has to be laid.

For Mass really is a feast, and the preparations are just as practical and definite as for any meal. In preparation for the feast, we ready table, tablecloth, plate, cup, wineflask, water-cruet, bread, napkins. The celebrant washes his hands and the people sing a sort of grace-before-dinner. All this happens rapidly, despite being fairly elaborate. It can't avoid being elaborate: there's no such thing as a simple dinner party.

But there is in our rite a quality of luxuriance which starts now, after the sermon is done, and rises to an almost incredible climax of complexity and lushness with the consecration. This [ceremonial luxuriance](#) is unlike anything that has gone before. It's as if the Church roused herself for this third movement of Mass to celebrate not just ornately, but *as ornately as possible*. From this point on we'll be describing gestures and ceremonies which are the *maximum*: it's hard to imagine how they could be more extreme. These notes from this point on will beggar the belief of anyone who just reads them, without having seen High Mass celebrated properly.

You'll remember from last week that when a high-living lady named Mary Magdalen heard that JESUS was at table, she laid hands on the most extravagant perfume, flung herself beneath His place at table, and smashed the crystal phial over His feet. That's our impulse now. Merely setting a

table is not enough. If the Uncreated is to come down onto this altar (a mere block of stone, after all), and if He is to transform bread and wine and water (which are lowly enough things), and if He is to give His own Body to us to do what we like with, then it is fitting that these things be, as far as possible, prepared. It is becoming that the altar, the ‘elements’, and the congregation be exorbitantly primed for what is to happen to them.

They and we are readied by being ‘[hallowed](#)’, that is, made holy: which is a drastic and even frightening business. In preparation for Christ’s offering of Himself to us, we offer the equipment He is about to use for this unspeakable gift – food, table, us – to Him. We make food, table and ourselves sacred. We separate those things, and we lift ourselves, out of normality. We drench everything with fragrance. We render it all God’s.

This action of hallowing is overwhelming. There is nothing more absolute man can do with a thing than give it to God. It is all God’s anyway; there is nothing not His, and therefore nothing that is not holy. But now the Church (which is to say all humanity, assembled as one and in its rightful mind) gravely declares this particular bowl of biscuits, this individual flask of wine, and this specific group of people, to be at this moment divine property, and therefore awful. Bread, wine and people, now daunting in themselves, await the coming of One infinitely more daunting.

This action of Mass – the practical preparation for the feast, and the hallowing of what is prepared – is therefore known as the [Offertorium](#), in English [the Offertory](#). It is the offertory, or offering, of things to Christ so that He may more fittingly offer Himself through them to us. It is the offertory of ourselves to Him so that we might more suitably receive Him.

Why the Offertory has to be elaborate and spectacular.

HAVING SAID THAT, we could just get on with the details (the fairly astonishing details) of the Church does at this moment in the Mass, this moment of offering, of transition from words to action, from talking to sacrament, from human business to the business paradise. We could say, airily, that the Church, acting in the same spirit as Mary Magdalen, has evolved extravagant procedures at the Offertory.

But that term, *evolve*, has a suspiciously vague quality to it. You might still go away thinking that the busy elaboration of the Offertory is fuss for the sake of fuss.

So in the next few pages I want to show how the Christian people were *compelled* to the hallowing ceremonies of the Offertory. These ceremonies are as necessary as the practical business of putting bread and wine on the altar. It is as needful to kneel, as needful to douse the ‘elements’

with perfumed smoke, to cloak the pattern in a silken scarf, to lift the bread toward God, to cense the celebrant, to kiss the table, as it is to pour out wine – if we are to celebrate this feast decently.

And to see why all those embellishments have to be there, we are going to step out of this freeze-frame – or rather hop from this frozen instant of Mass back through the uncountable frozen instants which were all the same moment, the moment of Offertory: back in time eighteen, almost nineteen centuries, to when the Church was young, although no more fresh than she is now, and people stood about the atrium of a private house in togas or tunics or chitons watching the priest celebrate, and there were old men in the congregation who had seen the Twelve Apostles, the Twelve who had tasted the Last Supper, when all this began.

At the Last Supper, when all this began, Jesus *accepto calice gratias egit, took the cup, and gave thanks*.¹ He couldn't offer His Blood as a chalice of wine until He had first picked it up, and He couldn't, in all decency, take up something so majestic as a cup that was to be the Blood of God's Son without solemnly giving thanks to His Father, from Whom springs material existence, from Whom spring worlds, and biological life, and living vines, and grapes, and the crushed juice of grapes. It was only a goblet of fermented juice being taken up and rejoiced over. But it was about to become infinitely the most precious stuff in the cosmos. So at that primal Offertory, at the moment JESUS took bread and wine and offered it back to the Creator, creation was completed. What the Father gave when He convoked the Big Bang, crying *Fiat lux, Let there be light*,² now, in the voice of a finite Man Who was also His divine Son, offers itself back. Finite matter, which God made and is therefore sacred, now hands itself, finite but also divine, to Him.

All mankind's vain sacrifices flow into the one valid sacrifice. The holiness of matter (that very vague concept) now becomes solid. All material things, and, most of all, all living things, are sacred because they resemble this unleavened *pitta* bread in a baked clay crock, this sweet watered wine in a baked clay beaker, being lifted off a wooden table in a hired room in Jerusalem on a certain Thursday evening in spring.

That is the first freeze-frame we have to consider: the primal offertory of bread and wine in that upper room. The Church's enrichment of our gesture of offering follow from her deepening awareness of what happened then.

¹ Luke xxii¹⁷.

² Genesis i³.

Justin submits things to our consideration.

THE FIRST DRAFT OF *THE FREEZE-FRAME MASS*, if we can put it in such a vain fashion – in other words, the first published account of exactly what Christians get up to in their Eucharistic liturgy – was composed by Justin, a Greek-speaking intellectual, who was eventually killed refusing to abandon the Faith in A.D. 165. (Modern Christian intellectuals are not necessarily so reliable.)

Justin's description of the rite of Mass is still worth reading if you are interested in such things, and how can you not be interested in such things? So here it is:

On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.

Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and a cup of wine and water are brought to the president of the brethren, who in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.

And they who are well-to-do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn [Saturday]; and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun [Sunday], having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.³

³ *First Apology*, chapter lxxv.; http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-46.htm#P3941_747415. You can read all of Justin, and everything else you could ever want to read about the first centuries of the Christian Faith, at the incomparable www.ccel.org site (*ccel*

I hope (if I may hector) that you haven't just skipped what Justin submitted to our consideration. It is charming: Justin Martyr – as he is nobly surnamed – has a elegant, manly style, and I quote the whole thing partly to give you a taste of what the early Church was like. How cheerful, energetic and sensible these people sound, with their readings *as long as time permits* and the celebrant praying as well as he can!

We're less interested not in Justin's tone but in his facts. Whatever modern heretics say, you'll see the Church was already a *liturgical* Church: everything done is *prescribed*, according to a fixed form. Still, the liturgy Justin reports is, by our tastes, or (to say the same thing) by the standards of baroque taste, a very rough-and-ready affair. Justin can describe the ceremonial of Mass in a few hundred Greek words: it is taking us hundreds of pages to describe what we do!

And note that when he gets to *this* moment in the liturgy, the moment of Offertory, after the sermon (the Creed of course was not yet there, because it was not yet necessary), Justin says simply, *Then bread and a cup of water and wine are brought to the president of the brethren* – who at once launches into what we would call the Canon, or the Eucharistic Prayer. No doubt this bringing of water and wine and bread had a little formality to it. Justin would have been horrified by a celebrant merely calling out to someone at the back: "I say, Gaius, would you bring me up that tray of victuals?" (although I've seen worse *gaucherie* at contemporary Masses!) There would have been some dignity and order to this bringing forward of bread and wine. But it clearly wasn't a complex ceremony at the time when Justin wrote about the Mass.

The Church offers the Sacrifice of Christ's Body reverently but critically: she is always watching herself do it. That is why the rites of Mass evolved intelligently and grew creatively (until the 1960s reduced spreading oak to shattered stump, in the interests of clarity of form). And, watching herself bring the 'elements' to the altar – those common, mellow substances, baked bread and fermented wine and plain water – the Church, reflecting on Christ's hands on the original altar in the upper room, realised that more is called for. She must formally ask God to accept these finite, physical things; she must ask Him to fit them to become Christ's Blood and Body; she must herself hallow them. Consecration, offering, consumption, which follow from this moment, must now be prepared for. The rite here demands elaboration.

stands for Christian Classics Ethereal Library. I imagine many of the 'hits' on this site are from computers in Paradise).

The Apostolic Constitutions.

WE WOULDN'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT this elaboration if a Greek scholar named Philotheos Bryennios hadn't discovered in 1873, mouldering away in a Constantinople monastery, a bound manuscript. This book was signed *Leon, notary and sinner*, and dated 1056; but the works included in it were many centuries old – we don't know quite how old – when the good Leon copied them out. The most important of these writings is another early version of *The Freeze-Frame Mass*, that is, another description of Mass, written two centuries or so after Justin Martyr's time. It's called *The Apostolic Constitutions*, for the anonymous author delightfully imagines the Twelve Apostles each solemnly prescribing the form for celebrating one twelfth part of the Mass. James is credited with writing chapter XII, which explains what ought to be done at this point in the Mass, the Offertory, the point we've now reached, the moment after the sermon is finished:

I James, the brother of John, the son of Zebedee, say, that the deacon shall immediately say, *Let none of the catechumens, let none of the hearers, let none of the unbelievers, let none of the heterodox, stay here. You who have prayed the foregoing prayer, depart. Let the mothers receive their children; let no one have anything against any one; let no one come in hypocrisy; let us stand upright before the Lord with fear and trembling, to offer.*

When this is done, let the deacons bring the gifts to the bishop at the altar; and let the presbyters stand on his right hand, and on his left, as disciples stand before their Master. But let two of the deacons, on each side of the altar, hold a fan, made up of thin membranes, or of the feathers of the peacock, or of fine cloth, and let them silently drive away the small animals that fly about, that they may not come near to the cups.

Let the high priest, therefore, together with the priests, pray by himself; and let him put on his shining garment, and stand at the altar, and make the sign of the cross upon his forehead with his hand, and say: *The grace of Almighty God, and the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with you all.* And let all with one voice say: *And with thy spirit.* The high priest: *Lift up your mind.* All the people: *We lift it up unto the Lord.* The high priest: *Let us give thanks to the Lord.* All the people: *It is meet and right so to do.* Then let the high priest say: *It is very meet and right before all things to sing an hymn to Thee*

That last paragraph gives us a shock of recognition. Once the Offertory section of the Mass is done, the priest in a *shining garment* (we

recognise an ancestor of the chasuble) faces the people from the altar to exchange with them what we call the *Sursum Corda*: “The Lord be with you”, he says; *And with thy spirit*, we reply. “Lift up your mind”; *We lift it up to the Lord. Let us give thanks* It is almost identical to our form, sixteen and more centuries on.

But what about the details of the Offertory? If the Church had been busily elaborating her Offertory in the two centuries between Justin and the *Apostolic Constitutions*, what had she been about?

Clearly, she has meditated on the tremendous dread of what follows from laying bread and wine on the altar. The first two movements of Mass – the introductory rites; the readings and sermon – are a serious matter, but it is reasonable to allow anyone in to hear, particularly those who are on the way to becoming full members of the Church ([catechumens](#), which means those preparing for baptism, and more casual enquirers as well). The third movement of Mass, which begins by leaving off talking, and *taking* bread and wine, is a much more direly sacred affair. Only those who are incorporated into the Body of Christ should be there to see Christ’s Body consecrated and offered.

The distinction between the service before the Offertory and after the Offertory (reflected the early Church) is so extreme that the two parts become almost two separate events. The first two sections of Mass – introduction and the Word – forth [the Mass of the Catechumens](#), for the catechumens may attend. The last third of the Mass, when the Sacrifice of Christ’s Body is actually made, is so profoundly sacred that only full members of the Church, the baptised, the *fidiles*, the faithful, are fitting witness. This last third, the rite of the sacrament itself, is [the Mass of the Faithful](#).

Since then, the Church has come to take a much more liberal view: everyone is allowed to stay on throughout the Mass, and the most half-hearted or frivolous visitor is welcome to watch God’s Son offered for the salvation of the world. Such generosity is a sign of Christianity’s easy-going confidence. But the sharp division remains between the Mass of the Catechumens, or ‘[Ante-Communion](#)’, and the Mass of the Faithful, remains. In the Christian East, the deacons still cry at this point *The doors, the doors!*, which is the dramatic Greek way of saying that all but the Faithful ought to withdraw from the colossal Mystery of Christ’s presence as bread. In *The Apostolic Constitutions*, the deacons spell it out:

Let none of the catechumens, let none of the hearers, let none of the unbelievers, let none of the heterodox, stay here. You who have prayed the foregoing prayer, depart

– that is, you half-formed Christians, and you of mistaken views (most of all, mistaken and trivialising views of Christ’s physical presence), with whom we have happily shared our mere prayer, go! (The *foregoing prayer*, by the way, is the special invocation made over the catechumens before they joined the general exodus out of the church.)

And even among you who remain to see this overwhelming deed wrought before you – cry the deacons – shake yourselves. Mothers, seize your children, and stop them skipping about the church. (There were of course no chairs or pews, except for the feeble, and one gathers that the atmosphere was far less hushed than what we expect). *Let no one have anything against any one*, which is to say, let all rancour between members of the congregation – should such a scandalous thing exist – be thrust out of mind, as a thing obscene to bring into the Presence. *Let no one come in hypocrisy; let us stand upright before the Lord with fear and trembling, to offer.*

To offer what? Mere (but the best available) bread and wine. *The deacons bring the gifts to the bishop at the altar* – the bringing has become a solemnity, performed by men set apart as servants of the Church. And because the bread and wine are to become what is unspeakable, unimaginable, they must be prayed over: *Let the high priest, therefore, together with the priests, pray by himself.*

Prayer, at this pinnacle of seriousness, cannot just be offered in silence: solemnity demands outward signs: and so already, in the fourth century, the Offertory has taken on the splendour of a throne-room:

Let two of the deacons, on each side of the altar, hold a fan, made up of thin membranes, or of the feathers of the peacock, or of fine cloth, and let them silently drive away the small animals that fly about, that they may not come near to the cups.

I’d lay great emphasis on those fans of silk or peacock feathers. They are one of the few glories of ancient liturgy that have not survived and flourished into the modern world, which is perhaps a shame. Their practical point – to keep off insects out of the wine – is much more pressing in the hot, buzzy lands around the Mediterranean. But their deeper significance is to show that already, sixteen centuries ago, the Church knew what she was about at the Offertory. She came to this moment of the rite dressed more lavishly than Mary Magdalen came to Christ’s table, with shining damask garments and peacock fans. Here begins the great feast, the wonder of world, majesty older and brighter than the sun’s, the coming of the King.