

# Chapter xxv:

## *The Offertory continues*

**L**AST WEEK WE BEGAN CONSIDERING the Offertory: the passage in the Mass when the altar is readied, so that the actual sacrament of the Lord's Supper can be celebrated.

An obvious puzzle for anyone who witnesses this physical setting of the wine and bread on the altar is that such a gorgeous ceremony is made of what is, after all, a pragmatic matter of laying the table for supper.

Also: why, at this presumably hum-drum point in the Eucharistic rite, is there such an obvious leap in energy and tension?

We pierced the first puzzle by reflecting on the fact of our daring to *give* bread and wine to God. God the Father, working through God the Spirit Who pervades the universe, is about to render these slight things into the actual incarnate Body of God the Son: and He is about to do this merely because (through the elaborate mechanism of an ordained priest) we ask Him to. The placing of man-made bread and wine on His altar is therefore a solemn affair, solemn to the point of being a matter of dread. We are gravely giving to God what, of course, He ultimately made, but what is now to be entirely His. We're not just setting victuals on the table, we are offering these edibles to God. We are formally rendering the 'elements' – as the bread and wine are called – to Him. Here is literally the moment of *offering* to God. The Offertory is so gorgeous because our gift, and the fact of our giving it, are so portentous. We honour the bread and wine now, while they are still nothing but bread and wine, because they are on the brink of becoming divine.

And we resolved the second puzzle – why the Offertory seems to involve such a sharp break in the service – by observing that it *does* involve such a sharp break in the service. Before the Offertory comes the Mass of the Catechumens, which the most ancient Christians called the [Synaxis](#), an (obsolete) expression in Greek meaning *meeting*; after the Offertory comes the Mass of the Faithful, or the [Eucharist](#), a Greek word (not, unfortunately, obsolete) meaning *thanksgiving*. In the earliest Church these two parts, Synaxis and Eucharist, were virtually separate services, and one could be

celebrated without the other.<sup>1</sup> In the early centuries, even when the Eucharist was celebrated after the Synaxis, the deacons announced *That's it! Go home, everyone [except the hard-core baptised 'Faithful', who may stay for Something Else]!*, – for the service of Synaxis was ending.

The ancient Synaxis evolved in two directions: it became entirely separate from the Sacrifice, and developed into the 'Office' (non-eucharistic services like Vespers and Mattins); or it fused with the Sacrifice and became, as we would say, the first half of Mass. But there is still a discernible feeling of *joining together* when the Synaxis ends and the Eucharist begins: at the moment when words become secondary and the amazing action with bread and wine begins. Mass is shaped like a butterfly, with two bright halves lightly joined.

### **What ceremonies, exactly?**

**T**HE IMPULSE TO MARK THIS GREAT MODULATION in the ritual of Mass, then, is natural to Christian sensibility. From almost the first instant of the Church's life, she was inclined to enrich the Offertory and make the moment splendid: to 'make something of it'.

How, exactly?

Last week we noted this delightful rubric for the Offertory in *The Apostolic Constitutions*, a description of Mass dating (probably) from the middle of the fourth century: *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 . . .* What is being described are big fans, what in India are called *punkahs*. At Ascension and St Agnes (situated as it is in a steamy riverside town in Dixie, at the latitude of Morocco, built on fetid marshes) a discreet electric fan stands behind a pillar and blows air into the sanctuary, and we could use a *punkah*. But sadly, the embellishment of [ceremonial fans](#) died out of the Western Church's rites during the Middle Ages; the East still has them, made of metal.

Another impulse at the Offertory was for the Church to make the taking up to God of bread and wine explicitly a *popular* act. Before the celebrant offered the bread and wine to God, layfolk brought the offerings up and gave the to him. This act of giving was formalised as an [Offertory procession](#): the people, or representatives of the people, processed up from the back of the church to the entrance of the sanctuary, and handed over the

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<sup>1</sup> See, if you want, the long discussion in Dom Gregory Dix, *The shape of the liturgy* (second edition 1945, BV178 .D5), pp. 36-46.

necessary gifts (and sometimes more *frou-frou* additions, such as milk and honey and doves and grapes).

This ceremony never quite died out. Something of the sort happened at Papal Masses in Rome, and in Milan, where there was (and is) a liturgical tradition distinct from the rest of the Western Church. And the Offertory procession was revived throughout the world last century by the modernising Liturgical Movement. It is one of the few twentieth century liturgical revivals or inventions (in fact I can't, offhand, think of another) actually in rather good taste.

### **The Triple Offertory: The plan of the next few chapters.**

**B**UT IN THE MIDDLE AGES, as Christian people increasingly shrank from the dreadful majesty of the Offertory, this procession of the elements did die out. The celebrant and his ministers took the elements and, on behalf of the congregation, with many [complicated gestures](#), readied them on the terrifying altar.

The glorification of the Offertory began instead to be worked through [music](#), and through an elaborate [series of prayers](#) of offering – unusually elaborate and prolonged, because they fill the gap left by the absence of the procession.

The reason the modern Offertory feels so dynamic is that these three processes occur at once. Music [**i**] and Offertory prayers [**ii**] are raised up to God while the Offertory itself [**iii**] proceeds, that is, while the ‘elements’ of bread and wine and water are richly presented to Him. Choir and people, servers, celebrant are all, in three different ways, busied.

In the next few chapters we are going to describe this triple process, which takes only five minutes at Mass. We'll discuss this week the music, then, for the next few weeks, (far the most important) the offering of the physical gifts, and finally the prayers murmured by the celebrant at the altar.

The three acts of giving – music, elements, prayers – are perfectly timed to end at once. When all three offerings end, there comes the dramatically anticlimactic moment when, the Offertory completed, the celebrant turns the people and begins, almost, to chat. For then we will pause take to breath for a moment before we mount to the plateau of glory: the Consecration of what has been offered.

### Music at the Offertory.

HERE'S OUR FREEZE-FRAME this week. The sermon ends. The sacred ministers sweep out of their sedilla (they'll never go back there now). If the celebrant has been preaching, the deacon and subdeacon wait for him at the foot of the altar, and he swings in between them. The three of them genuflect; the celebrant and deacon ascend the steps; the altar is revered, or osculated, which means, as you'll remember, kissed; the celebrant swings around and faces the people.

This freeze-frame is a familiar configuration. We have seen the celebrant stand here already, and we know what he is about to pronounce. And he does: *Dominus vobiscum* he sings, as always: *The Lord be with you*. Everyone sings back, as usual, *Et cum spiritu tuo, And with Thy spirit*; and he pronounces the great word *Oremus, Let us pray*. And then – prayer doesn't happen. At least, the explicit utterance of a formal prayer by the celebrant doesn't occur, as it always has before when that dialogue occurred. Instead, the choir at once sings something very short, so short that in the general bustle you might miss it, which would be a shame.

Possibly the people sang at this point even in the very early Church, too (which would explain why, in *The Apostolic Constitutions*, the bishop and lesser clergy pray *silently* over the offerings). In any case, the people – or, as Church music became more sophisticated, the choir – began to sing at this point a set anthem, proper to the Mass: the [Offertory Proper](#).

As with the Introit, what began as a Psalm turned into a Psalm with antiphons (that is, a resonant catch-phrase sung at the beginning and repeated at the end). As with the Introit, the Offertory Proper then began to shrink; but the shrinkage was more drastic here, for the Psalm vanished altogether, leaving *only* the Antiphon. (An exception is at Requiem Masses, where a whole Psalm is in fact chanted as the Offertory Proper, adding grave and melancholy length to what is usually sweet and short.)

Except at Requiems, the celebrant declares *Let us pray*; and the choir sings a lonely antiphon, marked in our weekly Missal ANTIPHON, though, by this odd pattern of evolution, it is not an antiphon *to* anything. It is finely chosen, as the texts of the Proper of the Mass always are, coming sometimes from the Bible and sometimes not. Often it forms a neat encapsulation of the sermon, or a comment or counterpoint on the sermon, and it is well worth digesting. But it is over almost before it begins. Now what?

More music seems called for, and in this parish we get both an Anthem, sung by the choir, and then a hymn sung by everyone. The Anthem is often among the most spectacular musical elements of the rite, hailing, in great poetry and music, the mystery of Christian Faith and its culmination in

a few minutes' time. The hymn is as often as not a Eucharistic hymn, meditating on what is about to be accomplished before us, or reflecting on what is at this instant being given to God for the purpose: *things*.

### **The holiness of the world.**

**S**O MUCH FOR THE OFFERTORY as a musical event. Next week we consider the Offertory as business with bread and wine.

We are about to plunge into the weirdest aspect of Christianity: the taking of bread and wine not so that they can become symbols (what good would that do?), but so that they can become the literal, actual, real, physical Body and Blood of a Man who died twenty centuries back, and lives forever and rules the universe.

I am stating these doctrines as provocatively as I can because they are provocative. Catholic Christianity is the faith of the Mass, and the Mass looks for hope, not in escaping the material world, but in the material world. If we take the Real Presence seriously, then we have to think differently about the physical world.

We cannot receive God's Spirit into the world, as we did at Whitsun, unless we grasp that the world is the sort of place so awesome that it might just be *capable* of receiving Him. We cannot decently venerate the Host, as we did at Corpus Christi last week, unless we descry that ordinary bread and *vin de table* are such marvels they might indeed play host for Christ's Blood and His Body. If we aren't staggered by the incomparable world out of which Christ has ascended, we will not understand how wonderful fitting are the ways (sacrament, Holy Ghost) by which God remains in it. The paten and the chalice are capable of containing What they contain because bread and wine are, like all material things, innately holy.

(Ugh! *The holiness of everyday things* was a popular theme for sermons a generation back, so now, like everything the Age of Aquarius laid its withering hand upon, the very phrase sounds callow and tawdry. God damn the 1960s for all eternity.)

What we perhaps need to grasp is not the holiness but the dreadful freshness of everyday things. The sons of God shouted for joy when they first heard the morning stars singing together.<sup>2</sup> When we see the stars every night (as we should try to do), we ought to shout for joy – not out of affectation, but because baptism should put us beyond the wicked, stupid sensibility that finds the glory of the world drab merely because there is so

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<sup>2</sup> Job xxviii7.

much of it, and hackneyed because we are allowed to see it so often. Of course the stars, the every-night stars, look much as they did last night – the same, or always slightly better, since we have now had another day to desire them. Such order is their virtue. Is their order any reason to be *blasé* about those burning suns of the night sky? To be *blasé* is to be dead. To be bored with the common gleam of the world is insanity. If we cannot surmount this feeble-minded boredom in the face of the *repetition* of splendour, we will not see the world, and therefore we will not see God in it.

Here is a passage from the Gospel according to St G.K. Chesterton, praising better than I can the grace of venerating everyday things, of ‘exulting in monotony’.

Variation in human affairs is generally brought into them, not by life, but by death; by the dying down or breaking off of their strength or desire. A man varies his movements because of some slight element of failure or fatigue. He gets into an omnibus because he is tired of walking; or he walks because he is tired of sitting still. But if his life and joy were so gigantic that he never tired of going to Islington, he might go to Islington as regularly as the Thames goes to Sheerness. The very speed and ecstasy of his life would have the stillness of death.

The sun rises every morning. I do not rise every morning; but the variation is due not to my activity, but to my inaction. Now, to put the matter in a popular phrase, it might be true that the sun rises regularly because he never gets tired of rising. His routine might be due, not to a lifelessness, but to a rush of life.

The thing I mean can be seen, for instance, in children, when they find some game or joke that they specially enjoy. A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence, of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, “Do it again”; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony.

But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, “Do it again” to the sun; and every evening, “Do it again” to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> From *Orthodoxy*, chapter iv (paraphrasing mine). You can read most of Chesterton’s best work online, by going to <http://www.dur.ac.uk/%7Edcs6mpw/gkc/books/index.html>, or by visiting our excellent parish website, [www.ascensionandsaintagnes.org](http://www.ascensionandsaintagnes.org), and scrolling down toward the bottom of the LINKS page.

Or look at this painting by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin of a *Water Glass and Jug*, which hangs in the Pittsburgh Carnegie Institute. Chardin is the great artist of the sudden, amazing, terrible quality of everyday things. *That* is what mere glass of water looks like. The immaterial angels might tremble at it.



Very well, if everyday material objects (no matter how they bore us) are wonders of that sort, why not take water and wine and bread and ask God to make them into His Son's broken, immortal Flesh? Why not? On with the Offertory! Let us begin to pray with *things*!