

# Chapter xxviii:

## *The Corporal is laid*

**I**F YOU LIKE AMERICAN FOOTBALL, you'll like this week's account of what we get up to at Mass. Offertory is a complicated "play", in which a dozen players, using a dozen pieces of equipment, create a single ordered and triumphant action. They set the table. They create the precise material conditions which allow Christ to be present (as literally and presently present as He was in Bethlehem, and at Golgotha).

Because these movements have been honed and polished for two thousand years, and because ministers and servers are – at least at Ascension and St Agnes – so well trained, the complicated ordering of bread and wine flow so quickly the eye can hardly follow it. (My eye can never follow a play in football.) The Offertory has the most complicated choreography of the Mass. Prayers, practical movements, and ritual gestures, come all at once, neither rushed nor sluggish, but deft enough to be bewildering.

Over the page is a frightening selection from the "playbook", describing what everyone is simultaneously to do. Don't bother reading it – although you might want to glance at the diagram, which, instead of the **Xs** and **Os** and arrows Coach draws on the blackboard before the game, uses **C** for Celebrant, **D** for Deacon, **SD** for Subdeacon, **A<sup>1</sup>** for Acolyte One, **A<sup>2</sup>** for Acolyte Two, **T** for Thurifer, and **M** for M.C., which is itself short for Master of Ceremonies (or even, in moments of particular elation, **Magister Ceremonium**).

And while all this is going on, the choir sings the Offertory Proper, prescribed for this particular moment in this particular Mass – today, unusually, the Proper, *Sicut holocausto arietum*, actually refers to our offering to God:

*Like as the burnt offerings of rams and bullocks :  
and like as in ten thousands of fat lambs:  
so let our sacrifice be in Thy sight this day . . . .<sup>1</sup>*

The choir offers an anthem, announcing the life through killing which we are about to see: *Christ rising again from the dead now dieth not.*<sup>2</sup> And, when

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel iii<sup>40</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Tomkins' anthem.

this anthem is done, the congregation adds a hymn, praising the offerings of love not just at Mass but in all life:

*The cup of water giv'n for Thee  
still holds the freshness of Thy grace.*<sup>3</sup>

Choir and congregation, intent on singing, see what happens in the sanctuary at the Offertory as a blur of sacred energy, a haze of dynamic order; and that is a fair response. But in this chapter we begin to map these adroit movements, since it is right to understand thoroughly what we are fond of. Precise knowledge does not stand in the way of fondness, nor of awe. Here – with gestures so fleet they dazzle the eye, so briskly solemn that they inspire fear – the Church puts bread on the plate, wine in the cup, so that God can come to her.

### **Our first freeze-frame.**

**T**HREE WEEKS AGO we reached the point in the Offertory where the celebrant sings *Let us pray*, and the choir offers, *as* our prayer, the Offertory Proper. This was the “snap”. Offertory began (*Hike!*). But we were distracted by the thought of what was being fetched, and has been lying all this while on the sideboard, which is called the credence table. We had a lazy chapter on bread, and then a spacious chapter on wine. Now our attention is back on the swirl of action around the altar.

We note, with amazement, that the celebrant has got out of the way. He is not needed for the moment. This sort of proud servile work is performed the other liturgical workers. So, having invoked prayer, the celebrant takes two paces back from the altar, and everyone swoops in to set up for the sacrifice in an elegant, well-choreographed burst of energy, in which the major-domo – that is, the liturgical quarterback – is the deacon; while the M.C., the Master of Ceremonies, plays liturgical butler, or perhaps even Coach.

When the sacred ministers genuflected (thirty seconds ago, three chapters ago, three weeks back), the M.C. swept off to the right, to the credence table, and picked up a mysterious, lavishly-ornamented square something. This something is covered with silk, to match the vestments of the day – today, green, because we are in the season of Trinity or Pentecost. It has a strip of damask on it which echoes the larger damask bands ([orphreys](#)) on the vestments and altar frontal. The M.C. holds this magnificent trinket in front of his breast, gravely. What on earth is it? Let us

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<sup>3</sup> Frank Mason North, ‘Where cross the crowded ways’.

freeze the action at this instant – celebrant standing back, M.C. off to the side, deacon about to take the square thing – and contemplate it.

In fact, it is not remarkable in itself at all. It's only a folder or portfolio or flat box: two squares of heavy cardboard, joined along one edge, also held together (usually) by hinges of silk on two more sides, but open on the fourth. It thus shuts flat, but opens enough to let a hand into its silk-lined interior, to get out or put in whatever it is it contains. The square thing's modern English name is burse (which means *hide* or *skin*; the word is cousin to the word *purse*). It used to be called – in merrie England, before the blight of Reformation – a *corporas-case*. For its only function is to hold reverently a much more significant piece of equipment: the cloth on which Christ's Body is to lie.

“What Christian is unaware that in celebrating the Sacred Mysteries the wood [of the altar] is covered with a linen cloth?” demanded a worthy named St. Optatus in the fourth century.<sup>4</sup> – Christians nowadays are not necessarily so well informed! But in the fourth century, Optatus could hope that all Catholic believers had noted and reflected on a certain custom. Well *before* Optatus' times, the rule had been established that Mass must always be celebrated on a linen cloth. The consecration of bread and wine as divine Blood and Body always happened on clean white cloth (not dyed; not silk). This was a serious and binding custom. For this cloth was – not a symbol; the Mass takes us beyond symbolism. The cloth was literally a *repetition* of the shroud on which the Body once lay before being bundled up and stowed in a tomb.

Since the **High** Middle Ages a long linen sheet, preserved in a church in Turin, in northern Italy, has been venerated as the actual shroud in which Christ lay dead – in which He returned to life – which Peter saw on Easter morning, sprawling, emptied, on the rock shelf, in the emptied cave.<sup>5</sup> The Turin relic has somehow been stained (perhaps by Blood; perhaps by the incomprehensible blaze of Resurrection) with the outline of the Body. Of course, no Catholic Christian is obliged to believe that the shroud of Turin is historically authentic. Indeed recent scientific examination strongly suggests that it's a mediæval creation. Catholic Christianity is not superstitious, and our Faith does not rest on such shaky evidence. A Catholic venerates the Turinese Shroud, if he likes, because it has been revered, for **seven** centuries, as a great public sign of the Resurrection. He can be cheerfully agnostic about whether the Italian curio is or isn't historically the

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<sup>4</sup> Optatus, *Opera*, VI, ed. Ziwsa, p. 145; *Catholic Encyclopædia*, [www.newadvent.com](http://www.newadvent.com), *sub* CORPORAL. and BURSE.

<sup>5</sup> John xx<sup>6-7</sup>.

cloth that wrapped Christ's broken Body because in any case, every Sunday and every holyday, he sees the real thing. At the Offertory he sees (admittedly not very clearly, since the deacon stands in the way) the linen cloth laid on the altar; He sees (later in the Mass) the Body laid in it, and the Blood poured out on it; and after Communion, He sees (although again the ministers obtrude) the cloth reverently folded up. It is treated so reverently because of what it has been – the Divine Man's shroud – and also so what it may well contain: tiny crumbs of the Body, and (if the celebrant has been clumsy) drops of the Blood. The Turin Shroud may once have been touched with the unspeakable glory of Body and Blood, but this little square certainly has been. This cloth certainly has been intimately connected with *corpus Christi*, the Body of Christ – so intimately connected that it is known as the [corporal](#), the Body-cloth. (The military rank corporal is an entirely different word; it comes from *capo*, head.)

Like most aspects of Mass, the corporal is old enough to have a long evolutionary history. In jolly old Optatus' day the corporal was pretty-much shroud-sized and shroud-shaped: a linen table-cloth flung over the whole altar. When the chalice stood on it, its edges were folded over to cover the chalice, and keep insects from plunging in and drowning. (If you do not think this is danger, you have never tried drinking a glass of wine outside in the heat.) Folding over the corporal was effective, but a bit awkward, and as the glad centuries of eucharistic celebration went on, the corporal effectively divided into three different things.

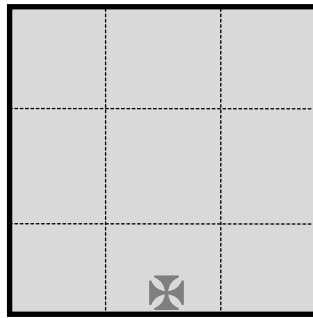
A big table-cloth, the altar cloth, appeared, separate from and underneath the corporal itself, and this remained on the altar all the time (sometimes protected with a dust-cover). Even the grimly minimalist Book of Common Prayer, which implicitly pared away almost all the Church's ancient ornaments, insisted on "a fair linen cloth" to cover the altar.

Meanwhile, to avoid having to cover the chalice by folding the corporal over the top of it, a stiff square – a square of cardboard bound in linen – came into existence, separate from the corporal. This is known as the [pall](#) or, more exotically, the *palla*. (Quite a lot of other things in church are also called palls, including the huge expanse of black or purple velvet that covers the coffin at funerals, and sometimes the corporal itself; I am sorry about this sloppy overuse of the word; it is not my fault. The Carthusians, whose liturgical practices deviate from the universal Church's in a few small things, still fold their corporals over their chalices, and should you ever be at Mass in a Carthusian monastery look out for this oddity.)

The corporal, freed of altar-covering and chalice-covering duty, shrank to being a square of linen small enough to fit onto the middle of the

altar. For a while in the Middle Ages it was the custom to carry this newly-shrunken corporal to and from the altar in a little bag, or even in the pages of the Mass-book, the Missal (which would have wrecked the binding in time). But in about the fourteenth century someone invented the burse, this useful and pleasantly-ornate contraption spread across Latin Christendom, and in 1692 the Popes declared it illicit for anyone to celebrate Mass without a burse.

Before being slipped back into the burse, the corporal is folded inwards – thuswise – into nine squarelets, with the squarelet that faces the celebrant embroidered with a cross.



These folds are important. For if any fragments of the Immaculate Body or droplets of the Precious Blood have fallen, they will have fallen onto the corporal; and when the corporal is folded in on itself, they are not lost. They are safely stowed within the tightly-closed burse, and, out in the sacristy, the ancient regulations are very strict. The corporal, and the pall, are thrice washed over a basin (the chalice is sometimes used), before they could be sent to a laundry: nothing of Christ escapes.<sup>6</sup>

### **Honouring and dishonouring the Body.**

**T**HIS TALK OF CRUMBS AND DROPLETS may strike you as quaint, or gruesomely literalist. Certainly it struck me this way when I first started going to Mass, and boggled over the extreme precautions taken against wasting specks of what I then thought of as bread and wine.

But we have to confront and quash our bemusement on this point, if we are bemused. For many of the actions of Mass from this point on are, not so much ritual gestures to *express* veneration of the Body and Blood of Christ, as practical measures to make sure It is not spilt or crumbled away. If we find these precautions *naïve*, then we are failing to understand Mass.

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<sup>6</sup> *Catholic Encyclopædia*, sub CORPORAL.

For we can't honour Christ's physical presence in the Mass if we don't also attend to the issue of His dishonour. We can't insist that His Body and Blood are here (not symbolically, not subjectively, but substantially) without realising that, being material, they can be abused. The faith of real presence requires us to be meticulous with the smallest fragment.

And conversely, modern liturgical sensibility, which prizes informality and starkness, and therefore sprays crumbs about, inevitably ends up slighting the doctrine of real presence. If we are not painstaking in our care of the Gift, then we lose our grasp of what the Gift is.

### **Twitching the action forward.**

**O**UR [FIRST FREEZE-FRAME](#) THIS WEEK had the M.C. holding in front of him the burse, with its corporal invisible inside, while the celebrant retreated two paces from the altar.

Our [second freeze-frame](#), an instant or two later, now shows the deacon and M.C. moving together. The M.C. proffers the burse; the deacon is taking it, as always with the courtesy on a faint bow.

Our [third freeze-frame](#), another few seconds on, shows the deacon, at the centre of the altar, spreading out the corporal. He opens the burse bookwise, spine to the left, and carefully slides out the thrice-folded corporal. The burse he neatly props up to the left (it's marked **B.** in the friendly diagram on page 242) – it'll stand there until after Communion, adding an elegant asymmetric touch of colour to the altar-top, the colour of the day and of the Mass. The corporal he attentively unfolds, not shaking it about, so that any particles of the Most Holy left over from the last Mass will stay where they are.

While this is happening centre-stage, a great deal is happening in the wings. In this same third freeze-frame we see thurifer and boat-boy loom into view (we'll attend to them next week), while the M.C., who has returned once more to the credence table, is doing something we'd hardly credit if we hadn't seen it: he is muffling up the subdeacon in a blanket.

### **The Humeral Veil.**

**T**HE CREDENCE TABLE was neatly heaped by the Altar Guild, before Mass began, with everything necessary for this ultimate Feast: serving bowls for wafers and for wine, wafers themselves in their silver canister, wine and water in decanters, and napkins, and finger-bowls, and towels, and tureens (all these things, you'll understand, have grand liturgical names). Over the

top of everything they then threw a silk mantle, eight feet long or so, a few feet wide, coloured like the vestments, altar-frontal and burse. In the centre is some splendid sign, often the divine monogram, **IHS** (a heraldic rendering of the name of JESUS). This mantle or blanket is called a humeral veil; if you know the Latin word *humerus*, or the Spanish word **WHAT**, you might guess what is about to happen.

What ought to happen, now that the corporal – or (to speak flippantly) place-mat – has been laid down, is that the deacon should fetch bread and wine and put them on it. This is, indeed, what does happen; but it happens with great, though swift, formality.

For the sacred vessels (as we call them), which are to hold the Sacrifice, are themselves gloriously honourable things. It almost goes without saying that they are made of precious metal, in reverence of what is to occur in them. But they are illustrious for what they do, not for what they are made of; and this magnificence is so great that, not only are they never used for anything else, they are hardly ever touched except at Mass. Even the subdeacon, whose job it now is to carry them from the credence to the altar, is not to handle them unnecessarily. And for that reason, the Church, very early on – at least as far back as the eighth century – invented a veil, called *humeral* because it goes over the *humeri*, the shoulders, so that the sacred vessels, and on occasion the Blessed Sacrament Itself, could be decently moved about, and not casually gripped in man's maculate hands. The humeral veil has been doubling as a cover for the credence table's *impedimenta*; now it comes into its own.<sup>7</sup>

At the start of the offertory rite, the subdeacon did not ascend to the altar with celebrant and deacon. With dextrous synchronised movements, typical of the offertory, he slipped off to the side with the M.C., and waited. Now the M.C., having disposed of the burse, returns to him. The M.C. takes up the humeral veil off those vessels and cruets; the subdeacon turns his back; the M.C. drapes it over his shoulders; and the subdeacon, adjusting this new vestments, revolves until he is confronting the credence. With his hands devoutly veiled in silk and gold thread, he reaches out to seize what kingdoms once fought for, and knights strove for all over Christendom – the world's desire, Joseph of Arimathea's heirloom, Britain's treasure, Sir Galahad's bane: the Holy Grail.

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<sup>7</sup> The humeral veil was also, rather irritatingly, called a *sindon*, which means *shroud*, and is word certain to get muddled up with *pall* and *corporal*. So it's a good thing that *humeral veil*, although a mouthful, won out. See Joseph Brau's article in the Catholic Encyclopædia (1910, [www.newadvent.org](http://www.newadvent.org))