

Chapter xxxii: *The Offertory is completed*

– meanwhile – without pause – we hurry on from the offering of the chalice
– which the priest consummated last week by reciting *Offerimus tibi Domine*
–

In spiritu humilitatis.

THAT GRAND PRAYER, *Offerimus tibi Domine*, being complete, the celebrant softly makes the sign of the Cross with the chalice and puts it down, in the middle of the corporal, behind the large Host which lies at the front, nearest the altar edge. The deacon picks up the pall and covers the chalice's mouth.

As if spent by the audacious sensuality of this prayer, and the audacious humanism of the *Deus, qui humanæ substantiæ* that went before it, the celebrant bends himself down, resting his joined hands on the altar, and murmurs (or says in his head) a much milder entreaty, fourth and quietest of the Offertory Prayers, *In spiritu humilitatis*:

In spiritu humilitatis,	Humbled in mind,
et in animo contrito	and contrite of heart,
suscipiamur a te Domine:	may we find favour with Thee,
O Lord;	
et sic fiat sacrificium nostrum	and may our sacrifice
made	
in conspectu tuo hodie,	before Thee today
ut placeat tibi Domine Deus. Amen.	please Thee, Who art our
Lord and God. Amen.	

It's like a sigh.

This is our first frozen moment this week.

Veni sanctificator:

BUT THEN, standing upright again, glancing upward toward heaven, and vigorously making the sign of the cross over the bread and wine, the celebrant orders God the Holy Ghost to come down and seize upon these oblations (or, to be Latin, the *oblata*), in the vociferous prayer *Veni sanctificator*:

Veni sanctificator	Come, Thou Sanctifier,
omnipotens æterne Deus,	Thou Almighty, everlasting
God!	
et benedic hoc sacrificium	and bless this sacrifice
tuos sancto nomini præparatum. Amen.	made ready for Thy holy Name.
Amen.	

At the word *benedic*, *bless*, he lays his left hand on the altar and with his right draws a large sign of the cross over Host and chalice together; for they are now one single offering.

The everlasting God, the Sanctifier, is of course the Holy Ghost. This is the only point up 'til now the Holy Ghost has been mentioned, and indeed (as we'll see when we get to the Consecration), our appeal to the God the Spirit is remarkably tacit throughout Mass. For it is the nature of God Who dwells within the world to be invoked subtly. Here, though, we are brazen enough to demand He come down (*Veni!*) upon these humble substances so that they can become What they shall become. The implicit image is of a Dove hovering over the altar, casting Its deathless Shadow over the Host and the chalice, just as when Gabriel cried out to our Our Lady:

<i>Spiritus Sanctus superveniet in te</i>	<i>The Holy Ghost shall come</i>
<i>upon thee,</i>	
<i>et virtus Altissimi obumbrabit tibi</i>	<i>and the power of the Highest</i>
<i>shall overshadow thee:</i>	
<i>ideoque et quod nascetur sanctum</i>	<i>therefore also that holy thing</i>
<i>which shall be born of thee</i>	
<i>vocabitur Filius Dei.</i>	<i>shall be called the Son of</i>
<i>God.</i> ¹	

The Spirit overshadowed the Virgin, and there within her was the Body of God the Son. Now the Spirit overshadows our altar, and soon the Body will lie here as literally as it once lay within Mary.

The oblations have now been elaborately rendered to God; they are His. We can guess the next step.

¹ St. Luke i³⁵.

More incense.

WE'VE SEEN INCENSE DEPLOYED twice already in the rites of High Mass. During the Introit, the altar was elaborately fumigated to make it fit for Mass. Before the Gospel the thurible was charged with aromatic gum and sent off to honour the Gospel book. So what follows now is both familiar, and predictable. Why would the Church conceivably *refrain* from offering such reverence to the bread and wine? They are, to be sure, only bread and wine, common things; but they are common things which have been readied in the most drastic way for transformation into what is infinitely not common. They have been extravagantly blessed and formally made over to God. Before we proceed to ask Him to make them Christ's Body and Blood, the gesture of incensation is naturally made over them.

Once more, therefore, the thurifer and his boat-boy glide up to the celebrant, and with the aid of the deacon and M.C., the celebrant heaps grains of perfumed gum from the incense 'boat' onto the burning coals. On previous occasions, you may recall, he hallowed them tersely (and wittily): *Be blessed in the Name of Him in Whose honour thou shalt burn*. Now, with Christ on the brink of appearing amongst us, Paradise seems very close. At this supreme moment, our altar and the eternal Altar of Heaven meld into one action, and the words of Mass express a new sense of proximity. And so this larger prayer is recited over the thurible:

Through the intercession of Blessed Michael the Archangel
standing at the right hand of the altar of incense, and of all His
elect,
may the Lord vouchsafe ✠ to bless this incense,
and to receive it for a sweet-smelling savour.

There, at the altar of incense, stands eternally Holy Michael (but for the Virgin Mary the supreme created individual of whom we have knowledge). Forever – declares the Christian imagination – he feeds that brazier, annihilating incense before the Presence that has never ceased to awe even Michael. And we appear for a moment beside the Archangel, our Sacrifice is acknowledged adequate in that bright company. The savour of this particular Offering is smelt in Paradise, and the scent of odoriferous smoke rising above the oblations makes visible God's invisible relish at the acceptable gift.

Anyway, mysticism apart, the celebrant receives the thurifer from the deacon (murmuring *Let this incense, blest by Thee, Come up before Thee, O Lord! And let Thy mercy come down upon us*). Now is spreading perfumed smoke by doing what the Victorian diagram over the page prescribes. – In other words, he thrice makes the sign of the Cross over the chalice (topped by the pall) and the Host, for in them is about to be recreated what happened on the Cross. He then marks them off from the world with three circular swings, the last swing turning back on the first two – I suspect, to put a brake on torque (but perhaps there’s also some mystical meaning intended in the subtle, corporate mind of the Church).

As in any dance, as in any great music, these manoeuvres appear arbitrary and complex when laid out in a diagram. But when you see the whole thing finished, it flows; and the celebrant recites this flowing prayer: *Let my prayer, O Lord, be set forth in Thy sight as the incense: and let the lifting up of my hands be an evening sacrifice. Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth : and keep the door of my lips. O let not mine heart be inclined to any evil thing: let me not be occupied in ungodly works with the men that work wickedness.*²

The celebrant, having censed the oblations, genuflects, and sets about censing the altar in preparation for the climactic sacrifice itself, in exactly the same way he prepared it for Mass during the Introit.

Over the page, as you’ve already seen, is a sketch what censing an altar looks like. The only difference between the Introit censing and the Offertory censing is that now the celebrant proceeds about the altar with the deacon on his right shoulder, holding back his chasuble, and – not the subdeacon but the M.C. on his left.

Where is the subdeacon, then? Why is he not doing what we’d expect? And to raise a different but related question: where is the paten – why is not sitting in front of the chalice? Where did it vanish to, when it vanished from the corporal last week?

It will take a few pages to answer all that; we can leave the celebrant and his two aides engrossed in censing the altar while we track down the paten.

Where is the paten? Why is it there?

IF YOU THROW YOUR MIND BACK a minute or so, you’ll arrive at the freeze-frame where (with the wine about to be mixed with water) the subdeacon has handed over the cruet of water to the deacon. Almost

² Psalm cxli2-4.

underhandedly, the deacon slipped him back something: the paten.

The celebrant, once he'd finished offering the Host on the paten, made the sign of the Cross with both, and slipped the paten out from under the Host. He passed the paten to the deacon, and now the deacon has passed it on; the subdeacon takes in his right hand, muffling it up in his humeral veil. Then paten and subdeacon disappear.

This was the second of our hard questions from last week. We saw why the wine is actually wine-and-water. Now why is the paten, laboriously brought to the altar, *receding* from it?

The answer's three-fold.

[i] You'll remember from two weeks ago, perhaps, that the paten is consecrated for the oblation of the bread, and then for breaking the consecrated Host over, and for holding It once broken. In between the oblation and the fraction, or breaking, it is not needed – the Host, once offered, simply rests on the corporal, Christ's grave-cloth. The paten is not the usual bread-holding device, as the chalice *is* the usual wine-holding device (since liquid behaves differently, and always needs a container). And since it will be a long time before the breaking or [Fraction](#) occurs, the paten is now got rid of.

[ii] Moreover: the paten in early centuries used to be enormous, and it *had* to be got out of the way. Now it is small and can, practically speaking, stay where it is in the centre of the altar after the Offertory. That's what happens at Low Mass. Since the Catholic ritual tradition unravelled in the 1960s, at all Masses it stays put, since there are (decreed the Church after Vatican II) to *be* no High Masses any more, only sparse Masses – how wrong they were. But before this sickness set in, the Church remembered the days of huge patens, and because she is not bound by time and shifting fashion – except for her present brief flirtation with hippiedom – she maintained the pleasant custom of getting the paten out of the way even when patens were no longer cumbersome.

Since the subdeacon happens to have the freest pair of hands at this point in the rite, she anciently gave him the honourable task of holding the paten for her, and he has never been forced to surrender the honour (except where the chill writ of Vatican II runs).

[iii] Because Mass is so richly encrusted with meaning from thousands of years of loving celebration, this action with the paten has a third significance attached to it. The subdeacon has borne off the paten to wait for:

The *fermentum*.

THE IDEA OF THE FIRST FEW CHRISTIANS CENTURIES that the bishop was the normal celebrant of Mass, died hard. The bishop was the successor of the Apostles, whom Christ has appointed to bring mankind to Him; the priest or presbyter was only his delegate. *Be careful to observe one Eucharist*, wrote St Ignatius to the church at Philadelphia (not Pennsylvanian Philadelphia), *for there is one Flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one Cup unto union in His Blood; there is one altar, as there is one bishop together with the presbytery [order of priests] and the diaconate.*³ At first, each city had its one bishop, who ensured the Church's unity, and each Sunday the bishop celebrated Mass in his cathedral church. That was the central, the normal celebration.

It was thought to be pity when the whole Empire became Christian and every town came to be divided between a number of parish churches, each with a Sunday morning celebration of the Mass, occurring at once in a different place. These Masses without the bishop, although an inevitable result of the Church's triumph, were thought of as a bit unfortunate.

An ingenious way of getting around this division. Acolytes or servers were sent off from the bishop's Mass, each with a fragment of the consecrated Body in a linen bag. They'd hurry these bags to each parish church, where this Fragment would be slipped into the chalice to mingle with and dissolve in the consecrated Blood. Thus there would be literal physical unity in the Sacrifice offered and consumed within the diocese.

This splendid business was called the **fermentum**. When you add a little yeast to dough it *ferments* the whole: the seething quality of the yeast spreads. When the bishop's Host is added to the parish chalice, it was thought of as annexing the parish Mass into unity with the episcopal Mass, and thus with the Apostles and the universal Church.

The actual sending out of the *fermentum* died away in the Dark Ages except in Rome, where it staggered on until 1870. And High Mass everywhere retains two traces of it. We'll observe during the Canon of the Mass that the celebrant still slips a Fragment of Host into his chalice – the Host he has consecrated himself, indeed; but it remains a mark of the Church's universal unity. And the subdeacon, as he stands and kneels holding the paten, is still waiting for the bishop's *fermentum* to arrive, so that he can collect It, and bring it up to the altar. As a matter of fact, the bishop's *fermentum* never does arrive; nonetheless, the subdeacon's gesture remains a moving witness to the unity of the one Sacrifice of Calvary,

³ *Epistle to the Philadelphians*, iv¹. Dix, p, 21.

offered all over the world every week and every day. It also remains a painful witness to Christians' disunity – and that's a useful jab.

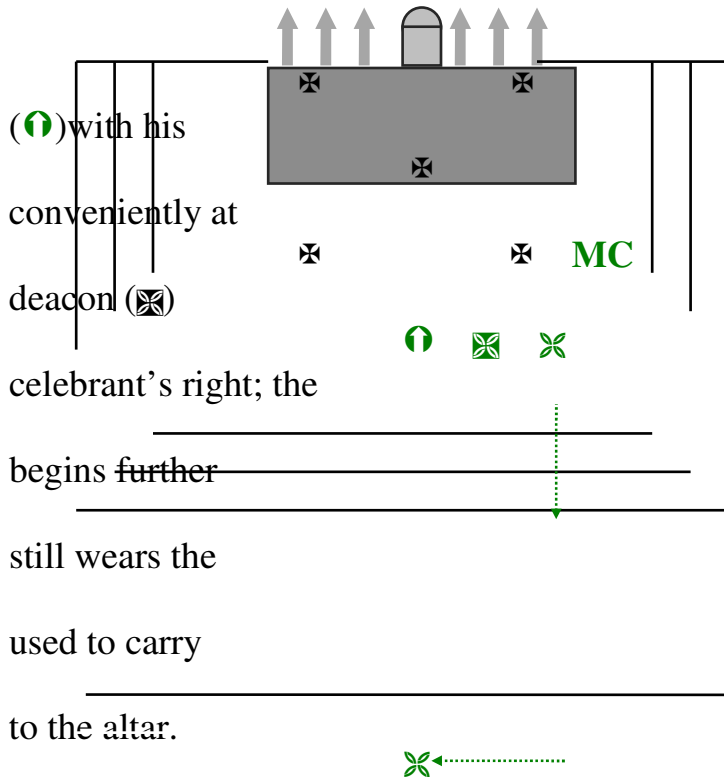
You might think these traces of the *fermentum* a bit *frou-frou*, foolishly antiquarian, a quaint survival. You'd be wrong. Fr Thomas Reese, S.J., editor of the Catholic weekly *America* (the only competitor to *The Tablet*, the world's best religious journal)⁴ proposed that for the Holy Year of 2000 the custom of the *fermentum* – which it seems he had just discovered – be revived. Fragments of the consecrated Host would be taken from the Pope's Mass in Rome, by jet, to every bishop in the Roman Catholic world (and perhaps, suggested Reese, to bishops of the Anglican Communion as well). They would be ritually received and slipped into the bishop's chalice; and then a *fermentum* from the bishop's Mass could be borne off to every parish in his diocese.⁵

Reese's suggestion was sadly not adopted; but it shows how decent, traditional, rich liturgy – the Church's proper inheritance, her true ceremonial – have come to sound revolutionary to her in a ritually impoverished age.

Anyway, here are the subdeacon's dance-steps:

⁴ www.thetablet.co.uk

⁵ <http://www.americapress.org/reese/1-millen.htm#e8>



We have celebrant
Missal (M)
his left hand. The
is to the
subdeacon (S)
right again. He
humeral veil he
the sacred vessels

That is convenient, as he is now going to take the paten *away*.

He takes the paten, wraps it up, rests it against his breast, and heads down to the centre of the sanctuary, in front of the lowest altar step. He genuflects (*This genuflection is anomalous, say the manuals, sniffily*⁶ – since normally one genuflects when moving *away from* or *past* the altar). Then he stays put, holding the paten up before his face, except when he is censed, and when he kneels for the moment of Consecration, which he does with everyone else.

Then he stays put, holding the paten up before his face, except when he is censed, and when he kneels for the moment of Consecration, which he does with everyone else. He remains here for a long time – 'til the Lord's Prayer, in fact – motionless, pretty much forgotten. Before we forget him, we need to ask ourselves what we've not asked before: who *is* he?

What is a subdeacon, then?

SUBDEACONING IS A GREAT WORK; its particular delight is in being forgotten. James Joyce's hero Stephen Dedalus, whom we'll come

⁶ Adrian Fortesque, revised by J. B. O'Connell, *The Ceremonies of the Roman Rite Described* (1996 edition), p. 117, n.1.

across again, is a connoisseur of pride, who

*shrank from the dignity of celebrant because it displeased him to imagine that all the vague pomp should end in his own person He longed for the minor sacred offices, to be vested with the tunic of the subdeacon at high mass, to stand aloof from the altar, forgotten by the people, his shoulders covered with a humeral veil, holding the paten within its folds*⁷

Before we forget the subdeacon we have to understand him. We've mentioned him a lot and not asked ourselves before: who *is* he? What are these minor sacred orders? What are they for?

Answering these questions will take a page or two.

That excellently solid work, *The Catholic Encyclopædia* of 1909 says this, solidly:

The subdiaconate is the lowest of the sacred or major orders in the Latin Church. It is defined as the power by which one ordained as a subdeacon may carry the chalice with wine to the altar, prepare the necessaries for the Eucharist, and read the Epistles before the people.⁸

And it adds, a little wistfully: *According to the common opinion of theologians at present, the subdeaconship was not instituted by Christ. Indeed it wasn't.*

Before the second century was very old the Church had committed herself to a three-fold ministry. Christ's people were served by three **sacred orders**: the episcopate, or BISHOPS (protecting and supervising the flock); the presbyteriate, or PRIESTS (each priest being a bishop's local delegate); the diaconate, or DEACONS (the priests' helpers). This three-fold structure was soon so venerable that the Church has never dared alter it – overtly.

In practise, she has reformed the three-fold structure in various ways.

New levels have arisen *above* the local bishops: archbishops, metropolitans, patriarchs, and finally, atop everything, the monarchical papacy.

The order of deacons has in the Western Church atrophied, being virtually absorbed by the priesthood. For many centuries the diaconate has had only a shadowy existence as a portico to the presbyteriate. A deacon's generally just an apprentice priest. It's a great luxury for us to have a permanent, real deacon in this parish.

⁷ *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, chapter iv.

⁸ Entry on 'SUBDIACONATE'. The whole work's on-line at www.newadvent.org.

Finally, new grades soon multiplied below the diaconate. The Church augmented herself in every direction, acquiring cantors (choristers), catechists, deaconesses, *fossores* (or sextons), *defensores ecclesiae* (retained attorneys, I think), *æconomi* (treasurers), and so on and so on. Not all these posts were regarded as *orders* – that is, permanent spiritual ranks. Some were, however. The Church (classically) boasted five [ordines minor](#), [minor orders](#). First came the [subdeacons](#) – who, puzzlingly, came to be counted as one of the *major* or sacred orders, and whose symbol was the empty chalice. Then, at a slightly lower rank, came [acolytes](#) (whose symbol was the linen bag used to carry the *fermentum*), and below them [exorcists](#), and so down through [lectors](#) to [porters](#).

The Church's normal enthusiasm for elaborate hierarchies is responsible for this profusion of minor orders; or if you like, her gracious abundance. Priestly ministry was no longer a rare thing – it was to flow over in every direction, outward from Christ.

The abnormal modernist enthusiasm for starkness is responsible for the abolition of minor orders – the Roman Catholic Church swept them all away in the 'Seventies, as part of her revolution against fun. She was returning, she boasted, to the ancient three-fold model. But it is easier to destroy that to resurrect. The Roman and Anglican Communion have tried to revitalise the diaconate over the last few decades without much success. In any case, as long as bishops are regarded as the Pope's local delegates – and that is the current Vatican attitude – it is a legal fiction, which is to say *phooey*, to regard the papacy as part of the episcopate. The papacy has made itself a separate and superior sacred order. That may be a good thing, but nothing is gained by dissembling about it.

I have tried to make this account as simple as possible, and know it's still a morass. To cut to the chase: the Latin Church affects to maintain the ancient structure [bishop-priest-deacon](#); in the Middle Ages this in fact evolved into [pope-bishop-priest-subdeacon-minor orders](#); Vatican II chopped the structure back to [pope-bishop-priest](#), making the world slightly duller without recovering primitive simplicity (and who really *wants* primitive simplicity, anyway?).

Some more about Minor Orders.

WE'VE ALREADY NOTED how the diaconate became in time annexed to the priesthood. A man almost inevitably passed *through* being a deacon, after a year or so, on the way to ordination as a priest. So too with the minor orders: they began to serve the function of stepping-

stones. A man was raised to the priesthood by many small degrees, and could in theory be tested and approved at each level. Occasionally in the ancient world a layman was elected bishop, or even pope, and had to be whisked through the five minor orders (or four, not counting the subdiaconate) and three major orders (or four, counting the subdiaconate) in a gruelling rush, spending a week or so doing nothing but be ordained. Those were the days!

In mediæval and early modern practice, there were lots of semi-clerics knocking about, since even a boy of seven destined for the priesthood might be given minor orders; he'd then slither out of them if he decided to get married and lead a lay life after all. Before the general abolition of minor order, a modern seminarian would have them all conferred on him at once, as a treat, while still in seminary.

The five minor orders and the order of deacons thus became transient and rather trivial ranks. But the *tasks* – of deaconing and subdeaconing Mass, acolyting (serving at Mass), exorcism, lectoring (reading Lessons), and portering (door-keeping) – of course remained necessary for the life of the Church. In other words, although the jobs remained and remain, the titles tended to float away from the jobs. The jobs of door-keeping and reading the Old Testament lesson and serving Mass are performed every week in this church by laymen. But the laity who perform these ministries are literally ministers of the Church: her agents, her delegates of duties delegated her by Christ.

Five Minor Orders, three Sacred Ministers.

RITUALLY SPEAKING, the mediæval evolution of High Mass demanded its own, rather different, three-fold ministry: the three Sacred Ministers. In most Western parishes, once Christians became very numerous, the bishop hardly ever appeared – as we observed a few pages back. Mass was sung by the parish priest, aided by a ‘liturgical deacon’, that is, a priest slumming it by acting the liturgical rôle of deacon; and by a subdeacon, who was indeed often a subdeacon – a man who had not been ordained deacon and priest, but had received all the minor orders (except that the top minor order, the subdiaconate, was called a major order).

However – yes, I heard you sigh; be brave; we’ll be out of this soon – *however*, by convention the man who served liturgically as subdeacon did not have to be literally a subdeacon. As with the person who read the lection without actually being a lector, the liturgical subdeacon might just be a chap.

When the English Church was roughly ‘reformed’ in the 1560s, she stopped ordaining subdeacons, and when the Roman Church was even more roughly reformed in the 1960s, *she* stopped making subdeacons. She also stopped celebrating High Mass properly, so the liturgical function of the subdeacon vanished as well. But the English Communion is more free; we are allowed to, and here at Ascension and Saint Agnes we *do*, we celebrate the Sacrifice with the sunny pomp universal in England until the 1560s, and in the Roman Church until the 1960s. Since our Communion doesn’t ordain subdeacons, the subdeacon’s part is almost always taken by a layman.

In this parish we have half a dozen men or so who have been trained to perform the subdiaconal rôle, and it does require a lot of training – there’s more running about and doing things for the subdeacon than for the celebrant!

The subdeacon wears a tunicle, which sometimes has one stripe (‘orphrey’) to the two stripes of deacon’s dalmatic, and is sometimes identical with the dalmatic. He sings the Epistle, and he handles, through the humeral veil, the sacred vessels. He is one of the three sacred ministers, who often move about together, with ponderous grace. But the subdeacon is nonetheless a layman, and we are to think of him as a representative of the whole congregation – especially now, as he holds on the people’s behalf the paten.

And having thus thought of him, we entirely forget him. He, kneeling directly in front of the miracle, forgets himself. Great deeds are afoot. The Offertory itself is moving toward climax.

More censuring; and then the lavabo.

MEANWHILE (a word we’ve used a lot in describing the Offertory, since everything is happening at once), while we’ve been gently meditating on the subdeacon, and on minor orders, that sign of all Christians’ universal ministry; and on subdeacon’s muffling up of the paten, that sign of the Church’s universal oneness, the celebrant has been honouring the altar with incense in preparation for the miracle to be worked on it. – He’s finished. – He hands over the burning gadget to the deacon (sighing *May the Lord kindle in us the fire of his love, and the flame of his everlasting charity*). He stands at the Epistle ‘horn’ of the altar and is himself revered by the deacon with perfumed smoke, in preparation for the miracle he is about to perform. The deacon bears off the thurible –

Meanwhile – the celebrant’s a sinful man. He knows this: he knows more bad things about himself than anyone else at Mass knows. In this last

moment before soaring to the climax of the rite, he longs to be made fit to offer Christ to God, and therefore cleanses himself. Having been once more honoured as only Byzantine emperors used to be honoured, with burning incense shaken towards him, he acknowledges himself a wicked and rebellious creature, and ritually scrubs his hands.

Actually the celebrant only washes his hands – or not even that. He rinses just the thumb and forefinger of each hand, since they alone are to touch the Body. This washing is partly a utilitarian affair, since he’s been handled the thurible, a sooty machine, and could probably do with a little laundering. But as always in the rites of Catholic Christianity, matter and spirit are united. The priest prays to be forgiven his flaws and to be made clean; he asks that this divine act should occur *through* the physical action of finger-dousing; and (unless the Church is entirely mistaken about everything) that is what occurs. It sounds like a childish superstition to say *The celebrant here washes away his sins with cold water*, but that is more-or-less what is happening, and it has the full glorious weight of Christian philosophy behind it.

Ceremonial hand-swabbing has a formal beauty to it. One server has collected from the credence table (that inexhaustible source of wonders! O excellent Altar Guild!) a simple silver basin, the [lavabo bowl](#). Another server has picked up a ewer of water and a towel which is, you’ll be surprised to hear, technically called [the towel](#). The bowl is gravely held out, the celebrant puts out his fingers, and water is poured, while he recites verses from the twenty-fifth psalm, which gives this ceremony its name, [the lavabo](#):

LAVABO inter innocents manus meas: et circumdabo altare tuum, Domine : ut audiam vocem laudis et enarrem universa mirabilia tua.	I WASH my hands in innocency: thus go I about Thine altar, O Lord : That I may show the voice of thanksgiving, and tell of all thy wondrous works.
DOMINE dilexi decorem domus tuæ et locum habitationis gloriæ tuæ ne perdas cum impiis animam meam et cum viris sanguinum vitam meam in quorum manibus iniquitates sunt dextera eorum repleta est muneribus	LORD, I have loved the habitation of thy house, and the place where thine honour dwelleth. O shut not up my soul with the sinners, nor my life with the blood-thirsty : in whose hands is wickedness, and their right hand is full of gifts.
EGO AUTEM IN INNOCENTIA mea ingressus sum redime me et miserere mei pes meus stetit in directo in ecclesiis benedicam te, Domine.	BUT AS FOR ME, I will walk innocently: O deliver me, and be merciful unto me. My foot standeth right: I will praise the LORD in the congregation.
GLORIA	GLORY BE TO the Father, and to the Son

As he recites *Glory be*, he bows to the Cross. – The twenty-fifth psalm is, as you’ll have noticed, a knowing little poem, aware of the shadow on human life, of the angry man who enjoys bloodshed and in whose hand are

hypocritical gifts. That wicked man is never so far away from us, being in us, but the celebrant craves to be free of him, to be shut up with him no longer, to move about in innocence, to stand, to praise. –⁹

Suscipe sancta Trinitas: the whole company of Heaven.

HAVING WASHED HIS HANDS AND MIND, the priest goes to the centre of the altar, looks up, bows down, and sums up the six Offertory prayers that have gone before with one final, magnificent crying-out to the Eternal Trinity:

<p>Suscipe sancta Trinitas hanc oblationem, quam tibi offerimus ob memoriam passionis resurrectionis et Ascensionis JESU Christi Domini nostri: et in honorem beatæ Mariæ semper virginis, et beati Joannis Baptistæ, et sanctorum Apostolorum Petri et Pauli, et istorum, et omnium Sanctorum: ut illis nobis autem ad salutem: et illi pro nobis intercedere dignentur in cœlis, quorum memoriam agimus in terris. Per eundem Christum Dominum nostrum. proficiat ad honorem. Amen.</p>	<p>and may they intercede for us whose memory we celebrate on earth Through the same Christ our Lord. that it may avail to their honour. Amen!</p>	<p>Receive, O holy Trinity! this oblation offered up by us to Thee in memory of the Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Our Lord JESUS Christ, and in honour of blessed Mary, ever-virgin, of blessed John the Baptist, of the holy apostles Peter and Paul, of these, and of all the saints: and to our salvation; in heaven.</p>
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As in the prayer over the incense, the approach of the Sacrifice has brought us close the heights. The everyday world is falling away from us. When we burned incense, our minds leapt to imagine the Archangel Michael burning incense. We are about to look upon Christ, and are now not so far from humanity's greatest heroes, who look upon Him without cease: the Baptist (*Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than he*¹⁰); St Peter, who holds the keys to Paradise;¹¹ St Paul, the first and greatest Christian thinker-about-God; Our Lady, incomparably greatest of all, from whose fair body the Body of Christ was formed. These five ordinary names – Mary, Michael, John, Peter, Paul – were invoked in the Preparation to Mass, and now are invoked again.

Not only them! All who stand in the presence of the Most Holy Trinity are called to speak to God of us as we offer the Sacrifice to God in honour of them. All redeemed humanity is called together now in the great prayer *Suscipe sancta Trinitas: Mary, Michael, John, Peter, Paul, et istorum, and these* (the celebrant kisses the altar). He means those saints specifically

⁹ Psalm xxv⁶⁻¹² (Vulgate) or xxvi⁶⁻¹² (Prayer Book).

¹⁰ Matthew xi¹¹.

¹¹ Matthew xvi¹⁹.

honoured here at this altar: his physical kiss ought to be honouring their residual physical presence as relics. Alas! we have no relics within this altar. But nonetheless the portentous saints painted above our High Altar are called into assembly: Agnes, Athanasius, Edward, Margaret, Alban, Vincent. Mankind is hurrying together. The Presence that makes human life serious and worthwhile is nearly unveiled: all things flow into the one moment –

Offering of money.

MEANWHILE – another, more mundane, unification has been occurring all this while. As all the diverse motions of Offertory progressed, six of the congregation came forward and collected plates from a server, who had deftly produced a stack of them, piled on a big dish, from a back table. The six genuflected as one, and sent the plates about the congregation. Money was being given.

This ceremony is also ancient, although the way it's performed varies from church to church (it's particularly elegant at Ascension and St Agnes). You'll remember that Justin Martyr, describing what Mass was like almost nineteen centuries ago, says:

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.

Money is a smaller part of life than bread or wine, but it is a part; the Church can't live without it; like everything else offered in the Offertory, it becomes clean.

The six collectors now approach the rail once more; the same server reappears with his large dish; they pile up their filled plates. The server goes up, up, right up to the altar, and lays the dish on the edge of God's table. The celebrant sketches a Cross over the offering; it is borne off to the sacristy (for counting afterward. – And meanwhile the six collectors, making themselves doubly useful, shut the altar rails and lay the cushions across the entry to the sanctuary, in preparation for Communion itself.

Offertory of incense completed.

MEANWHILE – meanwhile – once the deacon has honourably smoked the celebrant, he bears the smoke-machine down two stairs; censers the various servers; turns to the subdeacon, still engaged in his

lonely business of paten-holding –subdeacon bows – is censed (*clink-clink; clink-clink*). Deacon hands thurible thurifer – is censed himself. Then down thurifer goes, to stand behind subdeacon. Penultimate verse of the Offertory hymn! Roar of organ! Thurifer turns –

Offertory is done. All has been gathered together: bread, wine, water; money; altar; Heaven. All have been washed and scented, all things made so fragrant God Himself desires them. Everything has been brought into a circle about the altar.

Now the people, finally, are to be gathered too into the categorical gift. They are to be utterly given, since they are to receive so absolutely. They, too, are to be honoured as a royal priesthood, tremendous beings who are about to eat divine Flesh.

Thurifer bows to congregation; congregation bows back; he flings hallowed smoke thrice over them, centre! left! right! and they bow – and –

But summer is on us, and the living is easy. When the final verse of that hymn ceases, when the celebrant turns to sing out *Let us pray!*, it'll be September. The Mass and the year will be moving towards Bethlehem, God made little in our hands that we might be make great in His. *Spiritus Sanctus superveniet in te! The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee – virtus Altissimi obumbrabit tibi –*

©2002 The Rev'd Dr Richard Major, Priest Associate of the Church of the Ascension and St Agnes,
1217 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington D.C. 20005.
www.ascensionandsaintagnes.org email@richardmajor.com