

The Preparation of the Gifts: Offering with Christ

As we begin to reflect on the particular liturgical focus of this next season of *At Your Word, Lord* it is helpful to remember that our celebration of Mass follows a simple pattern.

The gathering of a chosen people;
...who listen to the Word proclaimed;
...they are united in offering thanksgiving to the Father, re-presenting the unique sacrifice of Christ;
...they are drawn to deeper union with the Lord by accepting the invitation to eat his Body and drink his Blood, receiving his very self as food and drink in Holy Communion;
...then, nourished by what they have received, they are sent out 'to love and serve the Lord.'

Each of these 'moments' in the Mass deserves our careful attention (and gets it over the five Seasons of *At Your Word, Lord*). As members of the assembly we are called to participate in these actions, fully, consciously and actively. When we have responsibility for preparing the Liturgy for celebration, we need to keep asking ourselves, out of care for those we serve: Is our parish congregation getting into this part of the mass as fully as they might. Are they truly participating? Or are we just going through the motions?

It should come as no great surprise if we realise that we are sometimes just going through the motions. We can so easily take things for granted and when the Mass becomes so familiar to us we can lose sight of the fact that it is not something that happens of its own accord, or something done for us, but is a 'work' that we undertake together. Sometimes we lose sight of that but, when we realise that is what is happening, it is important that we take steps to correct it, so as to make possible a deeper, fuller celebration. The great richness of the Mass is something we neglect at our peril. For when we neglect this we neglect Christ who is present in the assembly gathered, in the word proclaimed, in the sacrifice offered, in the priest who offers that sacrifice, and in the communion that all present are invited to share. In all these ways Christ is present to nourish those who gather in his name so that, sent out they may be more faithful witnesses of him to the world he loves.

At Your Word, Lord

One of the principal foci of the *At Your Word, Lord* programme is the celebration of the Liturgy in our Diocese. One of the principal opportunities that it presents us with is that of a sustained process of Liturgical formation.

The simple pattern described above identifies a number of key moments in the Mass. The first two – the gathering and the liturgy of the word – were the main ritual focus for Season One and Season II of *At Your Word, Lord* respectively. The last three – the great thanksgiving, the communion and the sending out to continue the mission of the Church – are the main foci of the final two *At Your Word, Lord* Seasons.

What about this middle Season, the third? Its theme is the preparation of the gifts and the altar. Perhaps the first thing to note is that this theme does not appear on the list given above. Indeed it does not appear in the list of key sections of the Mass in the Missal itself. In terms of the ritual of the Mass what we focus on this season is hardly really there. The Preparation of the Gifts is simply that, the introductory acts, introductory moments of the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

That might seem a little strange, maybe a waste of an opportunity. But it is not so. What this Season does is provide us with an opportunity for two important things. First to take stock of what we have been doing over the first two Seasons of *At Your Word, Lord*, and secondly to take the measure and ensure we are well prepared for what lies ahead of us.

What have we learnt?

In many parishes this work of preparing the liturgy for celebration has been something undertaken more or less for the first time. In other parishes new people have been drawn into this work. It is valuable to look back and ask:

- How is the work of liturgy preparation going?
- What has worked well?
- What less well?
- What have we learnt helps us to work together, as a team and with others?

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- What are the challenges to our working well together?

What has been learnt over the past year?

- About the Liturgy in general? And about the Introductory Rites and the Liturgy of the Word in particular?
- What has been done differently as a result of what has been read and taught?
- What effect has that had on parish participation in the Liturgy?
- How do you know?
- What have you learnt about yourself and the group, about the parish and about God as a result of this work of liturgy preparation?

These are questions that each member of the group might like to reflect on, but they are also questions worth looking at as a group together.

Reviewing what we have done

This is something that the Liturgy team needs to take responsibility for itself. But it is also worthwhile asking others in the parish what they think.

The Liturgy is a complex and a demanding work. It would be a mistake to think that the skills we need to minister it can all be acquired straight away. We can learn some things quickly, but other things need to mature in us and our parish before we can really take advantage of them.

It would be worth re-reading any notes taken at the Liturgy Workshops held before Seasons I and II, as well as Chapter 4 from the Liturgy Preparation book for Season I and Chapters 3 and 4 from the Liturgy Preparation book for Season II. If you do not have a copy of the handbooks, then the handbooks are available from the *At Your Word, Lord* office and on the passworded sections of the *At Your Word, Lord* website: www.aywl.org.uk. Chapter 3 from the book for Season II is also available from www.liturgyoffice.co.uk/AYWL

Look too at any working notes from your liturgy preparation meetings.

- What were the decisions you made?
- What happened when you tried to act on those?
- What was successful and what less so?
- How do you judge success in these cases?

- What has been learnt from the experiences?
- What further progress might be sought?
- What, if anything, is different about your parish liturgy now, as compared to a year ago?
- What have we learnt helps us to work together, as a team and with others?
- What are the challenges to our working well together?

If there has not been any feedback from the parish, either from particular ministers or ministry groups, or from the parish more generally, then it might be useful to ask for some. Even if we will not sometimes like what we hear, it is usually helpful to know what others are thinking, and it might well be something they would be grateful to be asked about. The work of liturgical renewal is an on-going work. It requires patience and dedication.

What and how are we preparing?

This Season gives us the opportunity to ask ourselves some more general questions:

- What is the Liturgy of the Eucharist and what does it engage us with?
- How well does our present practice in celebrating this part of the Mass help us engage with the mysteries of Christ it gives new form to?
- Are there things we can do which will help better reveal the meaning of what we do, and draw us more fully into the action of the Liturgy?
- The Liturgy of the Eucharist and its meaning is something that the rest of the parish will have an opportunity for focussing on in Season IV of *At Your Word, Lord*. However it is something the Liturgy Preparation Group ought to spend some time considering in order to get the best out of the opportunities offered by Season III. How can one focus properly on how one is preparing for something unless one has a good understanding of what is being prepared for?

The rest of this chapter will be of some help in identifying some of the principal issues – about our giving thanks, about the symbolism of the bread and wine and how we can assist these signs to speak even once they have become the

Body and Blood of Jesus. However a broader context needs to be taken into consideration. The Bibliography offers suggestions as to further reading. Books that are likely to be on parish house bookshelves already and that would be particularly suitable for a relatively quick read are:

Gabe Huck, *The Communion Rite at Sunday Mass*, Chicago, Liturgy Training Publications, 1987

Richard McCarron, *The Eucharistic Prayer at Sunday Mass*, Chicago, Liturgy Training Publications, 1997

J.D. Crichton, *Understanding the Mass*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1993

Jean Lebon, *How to Understand the Liturgy*, London, SCM Press, 1987

An even briefer overview is offered by a pastoral letter by the Archbishop of Los Angeles, Cardinal Mahoney. The letter *Gather faithfully together* has been published by Liturgy Training Publications, Chicago. It can also be downloaded from <http://www.la-archdiocese.org/Eucharist/E970904.html>

Preparing for the Eucharist

Already it has been noted that this time of preparation in the Liturgy is not an end in itself, but precisely is a preparation for what comes next.

It is a time for preparing the altar – dressing it for the sacred actions which are to be taking place at it.

It is a time for bringing bread and wine to the altar, for the priest to receive them and to thank God for them, placing them on the altar so that they are ready for the Great Thanksgiving of the Eucharistic Prayer

It is a time, in most parishes and at least at Sunday Mass, for the taking of the collection.

It is a time too for our again collecting ourselves together, preparing ourselves for what we are to do next - our joining in the great thanksgiving and the offering of the sacrifice, and in our reception of Holy Communion which flows from that.

Careful preparation provides an opportunity to lay a firm foundation for all that comes next. What comes next is of such importance, and has such a central place in the life of the Church, that it is

most important to ensure that we do indeed pay careful attention to how we prepare for it.

The Primary Symbols

– the gifts we offer

There are four gifts that are brought to the altar during this part of the Mass

The first two are the elements of bread and wine that will become the Body and Blood of Christ.

The third is the collection – nowadays this is usually taken in the form of money, but in previous times it was more commonly taken in the forms of food and drink to be shared with those in need. The fourth is ourselves, joined with Christ in the offering of his sacrifice.

Let us consider each of these in turn.

First, the bread and the wine. As these are received and placed on the altar the priest prays simple prayers of blessing. He blesses God for the gifts of bread and wine: ‘fruit of the earth, work of human hands.’ These prayers derive from a Jewish prayer offered at the domestic table before eating. They recognise God as the source of what is to be eaten, and they acknowledge that these things we eat are things that human beings have prepared using God’s good gifts.

Through the Church’s prayer Christ will take this food and drink and transform it into himself. That this bread and wine becomes his Body and Blood is the certain faith of the Church, but what is not always clear to the assembled people is that the gifts we bring to the altar are actually bread and wine.

The Bread

In the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) it is stressed that ‘the meaning of the sign demands that the material for the Eucharistic celebration truly have the appearance of food’ and that the wine be truly wine, ‘fruit of the vine, natural and pure’ (GIRM 321, 322) Why is this? Because of the sign value that bread has as the staple food. We speak of those who go out to work, ‘putting the bread on the table’, as being ‘the bread-winner’. In our society bread stands as a symbol of our basic food. In the Bible bread bears the same significance, perhaps most clearly in the accounts of the Temptation of Jesus in Matthew and Luke’s gospels where Jesus, hungry from his 40 days fast, is tempted to turn stones into bread. He answers the devil that ‘man does

not live on bread alone', and indeed this is true. We live from the food that brings eternal life, the bread of heaven, Christ himself. But even become his Body, the sacramental food speaks all the more powerfully of its centrality in our lives when it has the appearance of true bread, real food.

The General Instruction goes on to emphasise that the tradition of the Western Church has been to use unleavened bread (a reminder of the unleavened bread of the Passover, a 'pure' bread, preserved from the 'corruption' of yeast) and that 'it is desirable that the Eucharistic bread be made in such a way that ...the priest is able actually to break it into parts and distribute them to...the faithful.' (GIRM 321) The reason for this instruction is also to be found in the symbolism of the bread, and it finds its most famous expression in the writings of St Paul (1 Corinthians) 'The action of the breaking of the bread, the simple term for the Eucharist in apostolic times, will more clearly bring out the force and importance of the sign of unity of all in the one bread and of the sign of charity, in that the one bread is distributed among brothers and sisters.' (GIRM 321)

The ideal then is that we use a single bread, which looks like bread. After this bread has been consecrated during the Eucharistic Prayer, i.e. has become the Body of Christ, it is broken that we might all be fed from the one bread. In the Ritual Focus for Week 3 there is encouragement for parishes to consider the question of whether they might bake bread for the Eucharist.

Because of the symbolic significance of the congregation being fed from the one bread the Church actively discourages the use of pre-consecrated hosts from the tabernacle during Mass. 'It is most desirable that the faithful, just as the priest himself is bound to do, receive the Lord's Body from hosts consecrated at the same Mass and that, in the instances when it is permitted, they participate in the chalice, so that even by means of the signs Communion will stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated.' (GIRM 85)

Sometimes this ideal cannot be achieved. There will be times when, for convenience and because of numbers, we use 'altar breads', pre-formed for individual communion (although even then the Church sees it as desirable that at least some of the faithful should be able to receive communion from a larger host, broken into a number of pieces at the Lamb of God for this purpose.)

There will be times when we have underestimated the number of people at Mass and need to make use of hosts reserved in the tabernacle. These things are sometimes necessary. But when we have recourse to them there is a compromising of the sign that the Church says is demanded for the Eucharistic celebration. And one purpose of the liturgical focus for this Season of *At Your Word, Lord* is to ensure that we put time and effort into ensuring that we prepare well for the Eucharistic celebration.

The Wine

Until the renewal of the Liturgy following Vatican II it was only rarely that the laity were allowed to receive the Precious Blood from the chalice. Even now, despite encouragement from the Holy See and from the Bishops of England and Wales, it is still common for many people not to accept the invitation to receive Holy Communion from the chalice.

Perhaps sometimes this is because the significance of what it is that people are invited to is not appreciated. Too often people refer to 'the wine' rather than the Precious Blood, so that its reality as Christ present for us goes unstated. Maybe it is also because the symbolic value of receiving from the chalice goes unrecognised. However the Bishops of England and Wales have again recently observed:

'Receiving from the chalice expresses powerfully the sacrificial nature of the Mass. By taking part in the Eucharist we are drawn deeper into the new and everlasting covenant which was sealed with the blood of the Lamb. Our communion together in the blood of Christ is our communion with the sacrificial self-giving of our Lord. As we take the cup of salvation, we say that we are ready to drink from the cup that he drank, and to give ourselves in sacrificial love as servants of salvation.' One Bread One Body ¶165.

In the Ritual Focus for Week 4 there is encouragement for parishes to consider the question of how the congregation is invited to engage with the symbol of wine and to respond to the invitation to receive Holy Communion under both kinds.

Other Offerings

In one of the earliest accounts of the celebration of the Eucharist, outside of the New Testament, immediately after the description of the

Eucharistic Prayer and the Communion Rite we read the following:

'The wealthy who are willing make contributions, each as he pleases, and the collection is deposited with the president, who aids orphans and widows, those who are in want because of sickness or some other reason, those in prison, and visiting strangers - in short he takes all in need.'

This tradition of the collection at Mass is one tradition that the Church has certainly held on to! However as with so many traditions, sometimes its meaning has been lost to many people. It is not uncommon for people to think that the Sunday collection is simply a collection that goes to the priest. Publication of parish accounts is one simple way to put paid to that misconception and would also show what the money is spent on - maintaining the parish's buildings, paying the parish's expenses for worship, for catechesis, for the charitable and pastoral work of the parish, as well as to pay the stipend of the priest! Knowing where the money goes helps to make the giving of money more meaningful and helps this action draw us into a deeper participation in the liturgy.

During this Season of *At Your Word, Lord* there are a number of additional collections - for CAFOD's Harvest Fast Day, for the Association for the Propagation of the Faith, and for Sick and Retired Priests. These collections are additional to the usual collections, but it is a mistake to see them as being unconnected with our coming together as the Church and to celebrate Eucharist. From the beginning, as noted by Justin Martyr, the gathered Church has had a care for the needs of others, seeing in this fulfilment of the Lord's commands to love as we have been loved. Making an attempt to connect these collections with the Eucharistic action is something that is encouraged several times in Chapter 3.

In the earliest days of the Church the collection was not only of money but also of food and drink for those who were poor and in need. In the liturgy for Maundy Thursday there is a special encouragement to maintain this tradition:

'At the beginning of the liturgy of the Eucharist, there may be a procession of the faithful with gifts for the poor.' (Roman Missal, p 151)

The same practice is encouraged in the rubrics for every celebration of the Mass:

'It is desirable that the participation of the faithful be expressed by members of the congregation bringing up the bread and wine for the celebration of the Eucharist or other gifts for the needs of the Church and the poor.' (Roman Missal, p 400)

Such a collection has become popular in a number of parishes where there is an opportunity to collect, for example, tins of food for use in a local centre for the homeless. Some of the practicalities are discussed below in Chapter 6.

Often the collection is taken as people stay in their seats. It need not be. Perhaps especially on those Sundays where people are invited to bring also something for a parish collection people might be encouraged to bring their offering to be placed in baskets held at the foot of the altar. It would of course be important to introduce any such practice with care and to ensure that those offering little were not placed in the situation where they would be caused embarrassment. (Parishes will need also to be mindful of those members of the parish who make their offering by Standing Order!)

Ourselves

It has perhaps already been noted that the bread and wine, the money and other gifts that are offered are in some ways symbolic of ourselves - work of our hands, or gifts that we have earned. What in some ways symbolises us is used by Christ to once more give himself to us, in form of bread and wine, in form of the good works of the Church. All the gifts are in some way changed once they are offered. We do not simply take them back after Mass is ended.

For that reason it is best not to bring to the altar during the Preparation of the Gifts, other gifts that simply symbolise us and are going to be taken away unchanged, returned only to their original purpose. Sometimes this happens - perhaps at a mass celebrated to mark the anniversary of an organisation or a particular event in the life of a school, when the organisation's crest or flag is brought forward, or photos or examples of work done. These are not gifts, simply signs of who we are. So, it is better by far that they be brought forward in the entrance procession, rather than at the procession of gifts.

By this time in the Mass we have already been gathered for quite some time, so in this preparation of Gifts, other than the necessary

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procession of bread and wine and the collection, the other main action involving us ourselves should be our quiet recollection of the scripture we have heard, and our preparation of ourselves for what is to follow.

Other aspects of preparation

Silence

The rubrics of the Missal encourage a certain quiet during this part of the Mass. Song is permitted but not especially encouraged. Prayers are to be said by the priest, but they have at least as much the character of private prayers than public prayer - the preference of the rubric is that they are to be said quietly, inaudible to the congregation, though they may also be said audibly (unless an offertory song is sung). (Roman Missal, p. 400)

Silence allows people time and space to recollect what they have heard and prayed for during the Liturgy of the Word, and to consider the prayer that they are about to offer. It should not constantly be replaced by song or prayer spoken aloud.

Song

This is dealt with more fully in Appendix B. For now it suffices to say that if there is to be song, it is important that it helps the congregation to focus on the meaning of the presentation of the gifts, and to prepare for offering of the Eucharist. If the singing of the song becomes almost an end in itself then it fails in its purpose and becomes a distraction from the liturgy.

Preparation of the Altar

From the beginning of the Mass the altar will normally already have been covered with at least one white cloth. There should also be lit candles at the altar (GIRM 117). However at this time of preparation, sometimes there will be a more formal dressing of the altar, perhaps with a fuller cloth. This will obviously be easier to accomplish if the candles already in place are not actually on the altar, but next to the altar.

Whether the altar is dressed fully before Mass begins or only at this time, it is important that attention be paid to the quality of the cloths used, the size and quality of the candles. All these things speak to us of the significance of what takes place at the altar, of its importance to

us, and the care we take of this. At the same time what is most important is not the preparation of the altar but the rites that are celebrated there. Sometimes the dressing of an altar can take so long, and be so elaborate as to dwarf the Liturgy of the Eucharist which follows. This cannot be right.

Incense

Incense is something that has been used in many religious traditions as a sign of respect and honour. In the Christian setting it both suggests the otherness of the transcendent God and the cloud which symbolises God's glory (cf. Exodus 13.23 and 19.9) and as its sweet-smelling smoke rises it symbolises the prayer of the Church rising before God as an offering pleasing to him (Psalm 141.2 and Revelation 8.4).

Incense may be used at any celebration of Mass and is most commonly used to express the solemnity of a particular occasion (for example the celebration of Mass on Sunday as opposed to a weekday). When incense is used it is important that it be seen and smelt. There is nothing prayerful or significant about a priest swinging of an apparently empty thurible over the gifts, around the altar or towards the people. Good training should be provided for servers about how to prepare the lighted charcoals in good time, and a good quality of incense should be bought so that it is worthy for its purpose.

It should also be noted that the Church's rules concerning incensing have changed in recent years. Whereas previously there was a hierarchy of swings according to what or who was being incensed, the Roman Rite now requires that the thurible is swung back and forth three time (only) for the incensation of the Blessed Sacrament, the gifts for the sacrifice of the Mass, the altar cross, the Book of the Gospels, the paschal candle, the priest and the people. (General Instruction of the Roman Missal 277) Each of these is a means or sign of Christ's presence therefore each is accorded the same honour.

The use of incense is offered as the ritual focus for week 5 of this Season of *At Your Word, Lord*.

Eucharistic Vessels

The dignity that belongs to the bread and wine brought to the altar, 'fruit of the earth and work of human hands' demands that the vessels used for this be worthy. There is also value in their

allowing people to see not simply that something is being brought forward, but that it is bread and wine brought forward.

The vessels used for the bread and wine at the altar, and that will hold them once they are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, should also be worthy and durable. Normally they will be made of precious metal. Care should be taken to ensure that the vessels are clean and untarnished.

The fundamental Eucharistic symbolism of the many sharing in the one bread and one cup is more clearly expressed when all the bread is contained in a single vessel and all the wine in one cup. Additional vessels will usually then be necessary for the distribution of communion and may be brought to the altar at the breaking of the bread.

The design of each vessel should be suited to the intended liturgical use - for example the vessels for the Body of Christ having the form of plates or shallow bowls rather than cups, the chalices for the Blood of Christ being large enough for the amounts of wine needed for the assembly to drink.

Attention to the Eucharistic vessels is encouraged in the materials for Week 2 of this Season of *At Your Word, Lord*.

Conclusion

A good deal of this chapter has been about encouraging attention to the signs and symbols of the liturgy. It is not simply that we should have attention to these things for their own sake but because they have the potential to speak powerfully about our faith and the things of faith. The quality of our preparation reveals the importance of what we prepare for. It is sometimes said that 90% of human communication is achieved not through words but through sign and symbol. The care we take about the preparation of the gifts can help the meaningfulness of the Eucharist we offer and the Holy Communion we receive become more evident to the assembly of the Church. These are things we neglect at our peril.

They were not neglected in earlier times. The following, concluding, words come from St. Augustine and show how his reflection on the meaning of what Christ does for us is enriched by reflection on the simple and ordinary things that we prepare for use in the Eucharist.

Having suffered the passion,
the Lord gave us his Body and Blood
in the sacrament,
so that we should become these things.
In fact we are his body
and through his mercy we are what we receive.

Just think what the element of bread was
when it was still in the field:
the earth germinated the seed
and rain nourished it;
then it was taken to the threshing floor, sifted
and placed in the granary.
Later it was ground and baked
and bread was made of it.

Think now of yourselves:
you didn't exist and you were created;
you were placed on the Lord's threshing floor
and threshed by the 'oxen',
that is by those who told you the good news.
As catechumens you were stored in the granary;
when you were given your names at baptism
you began to be 'ground' by fastings
and exorcisms;
then finally, you came to the water,
you were kneaded and you became one.
The fire of the Holy Spirit came upon you
and you were baked and became the bread
of the Lord.
This is what you received.

As you see, the bread is one,
so you too are one,
loving one another, keeping the same faith,
the same hope and undivided charity.

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