



Fr. Daniel's Corner

Mass Moment: Part 18

THE PREPARATION OF THE ALTAR

And now we come to the heart of the matter. As important and precious as the Word of God is, it all points here: The Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Word became Flesh and dwelt among us, and now the Word we have heard, Jesus Christ, will become the Flesh and Blood we receive. Christ gathers us not just to teach us but also to feed us with his Body and Blood, the necessary food without which we perish (John 6:53). The focus of the Mass now shifts from the Lectern/Ambo and the celebrant's chair to the altar which is about to be prepared. This is a visual indication that a new part of the Mass is about to begin. The altar is the center of the entire liturgy of the Eucharist (GIRM #73). The bishop, priest or deacon, having received the gifts presented by the people, brings the chalice, ciborium, wine and water to the altar.

In the preparation of the gifts, bread, wine and water are brought to the altar, the same elements which Christ used. The elements (bread and wine) represent our whole lives, all that we have, and are collected and brought forward to the altar for sanctification. Interestingly, our financial giving represents our work, the hours of our lives. Now we give it away, we sacrifice it, for the work of the Church, which in the end is the work of evangelization and charity. So, in bringing in the gifts of bread and wine plus financial contributions and other gifts, we are bringing our whole selves, the fruits of our labor, the work of our hands. And the presentation of these gifts symbolizes the offering back to God, the people gathered with their joys and sorrows. However, we do not and cannot offer up our lives by ourselves, but only **through, with, and in** Christ's offering.

Again, the altar is the center of the entire liturgy of the Eucharist. Note that the altar is to be covered with a cloth. Surely there is a nodding to the meal experience here. We seldom eat a meal, at least formal ones, on a bare tabletop. The altar cloth also makes allusion to Christ's burial cloth and thus also points to the sacrificial nature of the Mass. Today the cloth is usually left upon the altar but in the earliest day's it was more the custom to remove it after Mass. This is still done on Holy Thursday and Good Friday, but as a general rule, the altar stays covered even when it is not in use. The Altar in every Church should ordinarily be a fixed altar located in such a way as to be the focal point on which the whole congregation naturally centers. A fixed altar is one that is immovable.

On the altar are placed the Corporal, the Purificator, the Chalice, and the Missal. The corporal is a square linen cloth (usually 12 to 15 inches square) which is placed in the center of the altar along the back edge). It is derived from the Latin word "Corpus" which means Body. Upon this the paten and the chalice containing the Lord's Body and Blood rest. The purpose of this cloth is to help in catching any small particles of the host or drops of the precious blood. At the end of the Mass, the corporal is carefully folded so that any particles will not fall to the ground or be scattered upon the altar cloth. This is important because, the Lord is contained even in the smallest particles of the sacred species and should be thus treated with the greatest reverence. The corporal normally rests on the altar only during Mass and is reverently removed after communion.

The Purificator is another piece of cloth, narrower than the corporal. This gets its name from the Latin verb "purificare" (To purify) since it is used to help cleanse the sacred vessels. Since, once again, we are handling the sacred Body and Blood of the Lord, a special cloth is used which will later be laundered in a special and reverent way. Note how every care is taken to reverently handle even the smallest portions of the sacred species.

(The Preparation of the Altar, Part II will be continued next week).

And that is your Mass Moment for the week.