

## **The Mass (Part XX)**

*by Fr. Tim Church*

### **THE PREPARATION OF THE ALTAR**

The bread and wine used for the Mass are brought forward from the people. From ancient times, this presentation of the gifts was made in a procession. It included not only the elements that were necessary for the Mass, but a quantity of bread and wine that could be used for both a distribution to the poor and the support of the clergy.

While money was also collected in the ancient church, people were more accustomed to a barter economy. This provided an opportunity for them to bring exactly the material things that were necessary for the Mass. It is typical at a Sunday Mass for the procession to be accompanied by altar servers who “escort” the offering procession.

The focus of the assembly has moved to the altar, and this is a good time to remember its importance. It is the norm in the Catholic Church that a permanent sacred space is defined by a permanent (immoveable) altar. This focal point in the church is oftentimes referred to as an “altar table” so that two aspects of the Mass may be emphasized. It is in the first respect an altar of sacrifice. In the primitive beginning days of the Old Testament this might involve a large flat stone where an animal was sacrificed by being killed. The blood of the animal was spattered on the altar stone and on those participating in the ritual. The stone altar became a symbol of both the ritual of sacrifice and the animal that was the center of the ritual.

Even though the sacrifice of Christ is the obvious reason for having an altar in a church, the idea of a community (like a family) gathered around a table for a meal is not lost. A cloth is placed on the altar to emphasize the dignity of the place where the Body and Blood of Christ will be shared. The cloth recalls the burial shroud that covered the body of Jesus in the tomb, which the altar itself now represents.

On top of this cloth, in the center of the side of the altar where the priest will stand, is placed a square piece of cloth called a corporal (“body”), referring to the place on the altar where the bread and wine is placed that will become the Body and Blood of Christ. The book (called a missal or sacramentary) that the priest has been using at the chair for the prayers of the Liturgy of the Word is now placed on the altar.

The bread is placed on the corporal. This unleavened bread, which is baked of wheat flour and water only, recalls the bread used by Jesus at the Last Supper. There the bread of the Passover meal recalled both the affliction that the people endured in the desert, and the journey from slavery to freedom. It was the bread used by nomadic shepherds who wandered without a home.

In ancient times the bread was a single loaf, from which fragments were broken and distributed to the people. The unity of the gathered people of God, brought about by the sacrifice of Christ, was symbolized in that one loaf. Practical requirements of large congregations and frequent communion have necessitated using the coin sized bread of the church today. It is common that a large "host" ("body") is used by the priest so that some of this idea might be visibly symbolized in the bread that is offered.

The wine that is used for the Mass must be made from grapes. "The wine for the Eucharistic celebration must be from the fruit of the grapevine (cf. Lk 22:18), natural, and unadulterated, that is, without admixture of extraneous substances." (General Instructions of the Roman Mission, #322) It is typical for parishes to purchase wine from vendors who are accustomed to meeting these requirements. Use of coloring agents and other additions is not permitted. Water is added to the wine as a result of ancient table practices of diluting wine before drinking it.

There are many traditional meanings that have been attached to this practice. They generally have something to do with our participation in the redemptive sacrifice of Christ, who "mixed" our human nature with the divine. The prayer used at the pouring of water into the wine says: "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share our humanity." (Roman Sacramentary)