

The Mass (Part XXVII)

by Fr. Tim Church

The Breaking of the Bread

The breaking of the bread is a ceremonial in the Mass that has almost died from a lack of necessity. Originally the use of a large loaf of bread required this practice. In fact, for liturgies where a large number of people were present, the breaking of the bread must have been a lengthy and involved part of communion. With the advent of coin sized pieces of bread for communion, there was no necessity in breaking the bread for the people. Only the priest's hosts would be broken. Today, in order to even artificially maintain something of the practical need, some parishes use a larger priest's host that is broken and becomes part of the distribution to the people.

The importance of the breaking of the bread is because of its highly symbolic value. It represents our individual participation in the Church, the Body of Christ. "Christ's gesture of breaking bread at the Last Supper, which gave the entire Eucharistic Action its name in apostolic times, signifies that the many faithful are made one body (**1 Corinthians 10:17**) by receiving Communion from the one Bread of Life which is Christ, who died and rose for the salvation of the world." (**General Instructions of the Roman Missal, 83**) This is an echo of St. Paul's instruction on the Mass:

16 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? **17** Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. (**1 Corinthians 10:16-17**)

The General Instructions of the Roman Missal elaborates this point further:

The meaning of the sign demands that the material for the Eucharistic celebration truly have the appearance of food. It is therefore expedient that the eucharistic bread, even though unleavened and baked in the traditional shape, be made in such a way that the priest at Mass with a congregation is able in practice to break it into parts for distribution to at least some of the faithful. Small hosts are, however, in no way ruled out when the number of those receiving Holy Communion or other pastoral needs require it. The action of the fraction or breaking of bread, which gave its name to the Eucharist in apostolic times, will bring out more clearly the force and importance of the sign of unity of all in the one bread, and of the sign of charity by the fact that the one bread is distributed among the brothers and sisters. (**GIRM, 321**)

The Agnus Dei ("Lamb of God") is a song or acclamation that is recited during the breaking of the bread. It echoes the words of John the Baptist at the Jordan River "The next day he (John the Baptist) saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.'" (**John 1:29**) The lamb of sacrifice of the Old Testament is certainly intended here. This was the sign of salvation at the Exodus when the blood of the lamb was placed on the lintel and door post to identify that the family within as part of the people of God. There is a dramatic relationship between

this and the action of breaking the bread at the Mass. We are identified as God's people by our participation in Mass. Here salvation is at least partially defined as the merciful bestowal of belonging and unity. The number of petitions for God's mercy is not fixed. Typically at least the three are offered, the last changing from a plea for mercy to a plea for peace.

As the breaking of the bread is concluded the priest takes a small fragment of the broken bread and places it in the principal chalice. The meaning of this action has changed through the centuries and in fact is so varied that all the possible meanings are too numerous to list here. One of particular interest is called the "fermentum" which was a small piece of a host consecrated by the pope which he sent to the more important churches of the city of Rome. This was then added to the chalice as a sign of unity among those churches. While this meaning is not specified in the current Missal, I must admit that I often reflect on the fact that Catholics everywhere are doing what we do in the Mass and that it is indeed a great sign of our unity.