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“We Offer You in Thanksgiving This Holy and Living Sacrifice”

The directives of the 2003 *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) have by now become familiar. It is time to turn our attention to a pastoral need that reaches well beyond the externals of the liturgy. There is a growing hunger for a mystagogy of the Eucharist that invites us deeper into the meaning of what we celebrate Sunday after Sunday. These remarks will focus on two moments of offering that deserve our pastoral care, with some final comments on how that care might be given.

The first moment to reflect on is the presentation of gifts by members of the assembly. “Even though the faithful no longer bring from their own possessions the bread and wine intended for the liturgy as in the past, nevertheless the rite of carrying up the offerings still retains its force and its spiritual significance” (GIRM 73). What is that spiritual significance? The prayers accompanying the presentation say it eloquently.

“Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. / Through your goodness we have this bread / wine to offer. . . .” Bread and wine are gifts that God has given us out of limitless goodness. The blessings continue: “which earth has given / fruit of the vine.” Bread and wine are the gifts of mother earth, the symbolic tokens of all creation. Chosen from among the many gifts God has given us in creation, they are now set aside to be offered to God in thanksgiving. “Which human hands have made / work of human hands”: bread and wine are human products, drawn from the earth and fashioned for human nourishment, companionship (literally “bread-sharing”), and joy. As anthropologists tell us, these foodstuffs are the condensation of all the human labor and care that has gone into their production. They are the symbols for all the work that fills our days and our lives.

What we bring up in procession, then, are not merely the physical elements of bread and wine, but the entirety of our world and our lives. As the gifts are brought forward by representatives of the assembly, all are called to place themselves in spirit on the altar table with the bread and wine. Our world and our lives are not to be checked at the door as we enter for the Eucharist. Everything that has happened during the past week is to be carried up with the gifts. Why? The bread and wine are destined to be transformed. “It will become for us the bread of life / our spiritual drink.” The bread and wine are to be transformed into eucharistic elements that are the sacrament of Christ’s self-giving and nurturing presence for us. But what about our lives, presented along with the bread and wine? Are we to expect

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a like transformation of ourselves? To answer that we need to look to the second moment of offering.

The second moment is a moment within the eucharistic prayer that is seldom noticed. Our attention is ordinarily drawn, in various ritual ways, to the words of institution. These words are then affirmed in the memorial acclamation. The following portion of the prayer, technically called the anamnesis or remembrance, begins with phrases such as: “mindful of,” “in memory of,” or “calling to mind.” This part of the prayer calls us to remember Christ’s death, resurrection, ascension, and return in glory. The remembrance immediately leads into an act of offering: “We offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice” (Eucharistic Prayer III). That is indeed an audacious thing to do, to proclaim that we, the church gathered here and now, dare to join Christ in making his self-offering to the Father. As prominent in our minds as that offering of Christ may be, there is yet something more that we offer. GIRM 79, quoting paragraph 48 of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, states: “The Church’s intention, however, is that the faithful not only offer this spotless Victim but also learn to offer themselves” (emphasis added). At this moment our daily lives, presented earlier with the gifts, are joined to Christ’s offering of his life. With him and in him our lives become a “holy and living sacrifice” to be offered to God in thanksgiving. The phrase ‘holy and living sacrifice’ echoes the biblical way of naming Christian life (see Rom 12:1; 15:15-16; 1 Pet 2:5; Heb 13:15).

The importance of this moment in the eucharistic prayer cannot be overstated. It tells us that our lives are to be seen as spiritual worship that consecrates the world and is brought into the assembly to be offered on the altar along with Christ. This is not a wild fantasy. Speaking of the mission of the laity in the world, Vatican II wrote: “For all their works, prayers and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, if they are accomplished in the Spirit—indeed even the hardships of life if patiently borne—all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. In the celebration of the Eucharist these may most fittingly be offered to the Father along with the body of the Lord. And so, worshiping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God” (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, no. 34).

But what of the unholy things that happen in our lives—the misuse as well as the good use of what God and earth have given and human hands have made? These are also part of our lives. Are they to be included in the offering as well? After making the act of offering, the eucharistic prayers go on to ask that we be accepted by God, that we be filled with and transformed by the Holy Spirit, that Christ make us an everlasting gift to God. That can be accomplished only if God forgives and heals what is frail and unholy in us.

People are hungry to find meaning in their lives, to know that brokenness can be healed and that goodness, no matter how insignificant it may seem, can serve God’s purposes. That is what the two moments of offering tell us week after week. Our lives are worth being brought into the eucharistic celebration and given their true meaning in the light of Christ’s life. Like his, they can be what some theologians have called “the liturgy of life.”

How, then, can pastoral practice help people find this kind of meaning for their lives in the weekly celebration of the Eucharist? Several questions and answers come to mind. How can we help people understand that our lives are truly living worship, worthy of being brought to the table? The homily may well be the key factor and a very good place to start. Jesus gave us the prototype for every homily. After reading the
passage from Isaiah in his hometown synagogue, his first words were: “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). The task of the homily is to help people understand how God is present and at work in their lives, how their lives can help to fulfill God’s plans for this world. Homilies are, in a sense, a mystical reflection on life seen through the lens of the Scriptures. Week after week the homily subtly invites people to discover the meaning of their lives.

How can the invitation to present our lives in spirit, along with the gifts of bread and wine, be issued and heard? One local parish, drawing on an ancient custom, invites people to stand as the gifts are brought up through their midst and to remain standing as the prayers of blessing are spoken over them. Over time the parishioners have come to understand that their lives are being presented as well. The invitation can be extended in homily and catechesis.

How can the act of offering in the eucharistic prayer attain its full significance? Does the manner in which this part of the prayer is proclaimed communicate the awesomeness of this moment? Attentive and effective proclamation, bolstered by appropriate mystical catechesis given either in homily or elsewhere, might be all that is needed. Engagement of the assembly in this corporate action can then take root over time.

Finally, what if people are unable to take part in the offering of their lives at Sunday Eucharist, either because they are unable to attend or because no celebration is available in their parish? A morning offering prayer that we were taught as children years ago gives us a lead: “O Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer you my prayers, works, and sufferings of this day, in union with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass throughout the world. . . .” Longstanding tradition has held that in cases of necessity “spiritual communion” can take the place of physically receiving Communion, with all its grace and benefits. On those days when people cannot participate actively in the celebration of the Eucharist, could they not be taught to make a “spiritual offering” of their lives “in union with the Mass throughout the world”?

In these and many other ways, concerned pastoral practitioners will find it possible to feed hungry people, to invite them to offer, in thanksgiving, the holy and living sacrifice of their lives.