

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The First Sunday of Advent began with a challenge beyond our control. Inclement weather made it very difficult for parishioners and visitors to travel to the 9:00 and 11:30am Masses. I suppose it was providential that I decided a few weeks ago to publish my homilies as bulletin articles during the Advent season. I ask that you please make time to read these articles in addition to any spiritual reading you are taking up this season. I have chosen this Advent season to focus on a part of the Mass that for some, may have little to no meaning: The Offertory. There are three parts within the offertory, which are the Preparation of the Altar, the Presentation of the Gifts, the offering of the sacrifice. This past week, I focused on the Preparation of the Altar. The point: to draw us into a deeper sense of true sacrifice. If we are to experience any spiritual benefits this Advent season and beyond, we must know how to make and participate in sacrifice to God.

For the celebration of the Mass, we refer to the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (quoted in this series before). It provides only that: instruction. For deeper meaning, one must investigate commentaries which will be relayed at the end of this series. The GIRM also tells us what must be in place before Mass is celebrated. Like the Cross on Calvary, the altar is a place of sacrifice and must be adorned and treated with proper reverence and is to be covered with at least one white cloth (paragraph 117). At St. Mary's we use two: the first layer drapes the sides and fronts of the altar and reflects the color of the liturgical season. On top of that lays a cloth that covers exactly the *mensa*, which is the table part of the altar. The altar cloths are always in place and ready for celebration of the next Mass, indicating the perpetual nature of the Mass which is continually celebrated until Christ's Second Coming. White is the color of purity, dignity, chastity, and Resurrection. Yet, the cloth color and material have historical and biblical origins which are important to the roots of faith and ritual. Hold on to this thought: I will get to that in a moment.

The altar is prepared after the Prayers of the Faithful. First, the principle chalice and paten are brought from the credence table (the place in the sanctuary used to store the sacred vessels). The burse is the top component, and the *corporal* (like a placemat) is removed from it. The corporal is unfolded in the shape of nine squares face-up. The chalice and paten will eventually be centered on this corporal (that will come in the third series). The vessels used for distribution of the sacred host and precious blood to the congregation are placed on a corporal that, like the two altar cloths, is pre-set. The purificators (like napkins), used to wipe the edge of the cup when the Precious Blood is distributed, are also placed. At this time, the prayer book for Mass, the Roman Missal, has been placed on the altar too. These are the items that are prepared ritually for the celebration of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The preparation is now complete.

But what is the purpose? What is the meaning? Let's go back to the altar cloth. For this, we revisit the event of the burial of Jesus after He was taken down from the Cross. John 19:40 tells us that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body of Jesus and bound it with burial cloths along, with the spices, according to the Jewish burial custom. In the following chapter, Peter and the other disciple ran to the tomb of Jesus, after hearing from Mary of Magdala, that the tomb was empty. The passage tells us what the first witnesses saw: not only the empty tomb, but the cloth that had covered Jesus's head and the burial cloths for the body, rolled up in a separate place. The cloth around Jesus' head is worn by the priest during the celebration of Holy Mass, is called the amice (notice the white cloth around my neck). That is the vestment symbolic of the covering that Jesus wore on His head as He carried His Cross to Calvary. Next is the cloth for the body. Why rolled up? It is related to a common practice used by servants and masters of

that era. A servant, after he had prepared the dining table for his master, would stand to the side, out of sight of the master, but attentive to the progression of the meal. He wouldn't dare to return to the table until the master finished his meal. When the master was finished, he would rise, clean his fingers, mouth, and beard, and leave the "napkin" crumpled in a ball on the table. The wrinkled, discarded napkin indicated "I have finished," the same words uttered by Jesus as he took His last breath on the Cross and is one more reason why the altar cloth is left on the altar. If, however, for whatever reason, the master left the table with the intention of returning, then he would crease the napkin into folds and leave it beside his dishes. This was a message for the servant that he was not to disturb the table, given that the master had indicated: "I am returning." This symbolism here unfolds, literally, when the deacon or priest unfolds the corporal from the burse (if used) onto the *mensa*. It reminds us the perpetual sacrifice of the Mass and that Christ's work on Earth is not complete until He comes again. Until then, we do what He commands: Do this in memory of Me.

Advent is an especially engaging time as the prophecies foretold in the Old Testament are brought to fulfillment in the Gospel. The proclamation *and* hearing of God's Word and the instruction from the homily, is vital not just to understanding but to participation. As we were called to vigilance in the first week of reading, sacrifice is also akin to the spiritual life. The preeminence of sacrifice is Christ's dying on the Cross for the salvation of the world, is always the focus of our worship, no matter the liturgical season. Sacrifice is a reality of the mystery of faith that demands participation from all members. Until that mystery is fulfilled, we prepare by waiting in joyful hope for the coming of the Savior.

Next week, we will explore the second part: the collection and presentation of gifts.

In Christ,
Fr. Jones