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LESSON FIVE*PREPARING FOR SACRIFICE*

Holy Communion is the shortest and surest way to Heaven. There are others, innocence, for instance, but that is for little children; penance, but we are afraid of it; generous endurance of the trials of life, but when they come we weep and ask to be spared. Once for all, beloved children, the surest, easiest, shortest way is by the Eucharist. It is so easy to approach the holy table, and there we taste the joys of Paradise.

– Pope St. Pius X¹

Bishop Barron reminds us that the goal of our worship in the Mass is a physical and spiritual encounter with the Lord, “the most intense communion with Christ possible as he becomes really, truly, substantially present to us.”

The Liturgy of the Word, where we listened to our King, has brought us to this moment of accessibility. We are about to find ourselves within the presence of the King, but his Majesty is no mere monarch among his subjects—present, yet distant and apart. Rather, we are anticipating a flesh-to-Flesh encounter, a great intimacy with Christ, who is not only King but Bridegroom.

So we bring ourselves more fully into preparation for this great moment through three distinct actions:

- The Preparation of the Gifts
- The Eucharistic Prayer
- The Rite of Communion



THE PREPARATION OF THE GIFTS

Bishop Barron cautions us that it is too easy to think of this portion of the Mass as a “hiatus”—a transitional moment where we pause in our direct worship in order to reach into our pockets or purses to fish out some cash or a check in an envelope, and perhaps join in the singing of a hymn. Meanwhile the ushers pass the collection baskets and some members of the assembly process up the aisle to deliver the unconsecrated bread and wine to the priest.

The busy-ness of the moment surely can make it seem like we’re taking a “break” or at least relaxing our focus; often this is a moment where parents will also deal with their children and pew neighbors will pass a remark back and forth.

This is not “downtime,” however, and that misperception is something we should work to correct within ourselves and our parishes because this time is no simple interlude. The Preparation of the Gifts is integral to the Mass and is, in fact, fraught with meaning.

Here our participation within the Liturgy demonstrates that we have, so to speak, real “skin in the game” in the form of our gifts, which represent more than appearances would suggest.

The bread and wine taken up the aisle are presented in all of our names, and in the name of all Creation as well. These are the products of air, soil, wind, sunshine, rain, and also of human toil and custodial care. In the same way that a new baby represents the co-creative consent and co-operation of a married couple with the will of God, the bread and wine represent our co-creative co-operation with the Creator and with the fullness of all that he has made. People had to plant the wheat and the vines; someone had to carefully tend to their growth and properly harvest their fruits. Others had to grind the grain and press the grapes; vintners and bakers and packagers and transporters— even office clerks—all have a share, however minutely, in this moment when those materials are willingly presented to the priest for the coming sacrifice.

Likewise, we present our monetary gifts. Although some tend to think of money as “filthy lucre,” the baskets containing our monetary offerings should



not be seen as a somehow base, or lesser, gift. As early as the second century Saint Justin wrote about the collection of money at this point in the liturgy. Abbot Jeremy Driscoll adds:

In the same way that an intricate story of grace stands behind the arrival of each member of the assembly into the one place where the Eucharist will be offered, so also many stories—whole lives—are being collected now in bread and wine. We also bring forward money, and we should not think of the collection of money... as some sort of banal, dirty but necessary affair. Money is our work. Money is hours of our lives. And now we give it away, we sacrifice it, for the work of the Church, which in the end is its work of charity and evangelization.²

Indeed, our checks and pennies are more profoundly evangelical in nature than we realize, for they communicate a message of constancy and commitment to the mission. Collectively they say “let this work, this announcement of salvation through the death and resurrection of the Christ go on; let our outreach to our neighbors continue and expand; let our church workers be enabled to feed their families and pay their bills so they can remain in place, for stability; let our buildings be safe, suitable dwellings fit for worship and fellowship and communion, and attractive enough to invite seekers.” They say, “God has given unto us; we are making a sacrifice unto God in return.”

Individually, at a more basic and personal level, our gifts also say, “this is us in the measure with which we dare to give ourselves to you.”

The act of making an offering from what we have grown, raised, or otherwise had a hand in making is not a new or unique idea. In the fourth chapter of Genesis, we see Cain and Abel making burnt offerings to the Lord—each setting aside a portion of their productivity (of grain and flock, respectively) to the Lord as an act of praise, gratitude, and humility. Our offerings do not go “up in smoke” but they too are sent heavenward in an expression of thanksgiving and praise.

“I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy.” –Psalm 27:6



SACRIFICE: A MATTER OF TRUST

For some, the notion of sacrifice within the Mass can be difficult to grasp, particularly if we are financially struggling and fearful that we’ll “feel the pinch” once we’ve dropped our coin into the collection basket.



In gratitude, those who can give more certainly should, but when times are difficult our gift can be seen as both a “giving” to God and also an act of *trust* on multiple levels. First, that all we give to the Lord will be used well and that our individual contributions, however small, become part of something much bigger than ourselves, trusting that a smaller gift will never be despised.

Jesus himself assured us of that last, himself:

He sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, “Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood.”
(Mark 12:41-44)

In the Lerner and Loewe musical, *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle shows up at the elegant home of Professor Henry Higgins seeking elocution lessons and offers him a shilling for his labors. Higgins, much struck, turns to his house-guest Colonel Pickering and says, “Do you know, Pickering, if you think of a shilling not as a simple shilling but as a percentage of this girl’s income, it works out as fully equivalent of sixty or seventy pounds from a millionaire!”

If this reality is true for someone as cynical as Henry Higgins, how greater a truth it must be for the living God who is All Good, and who, in fact, told us that our actions of charity or generosity will always redound to us in the fullest possible measure?

And this is the second action of trust that comes with our sacrifice: if faith is “the realization of what is hoped for,” as said in the Book of Hebrews (Heb 11:1), here we move forward in the hope that, as St. Bernadette (the visionary of Lourdes) advised, “God is never outdone in generosity.”³

Indeed, if you read the lives of the saints, this is an overriding sentiment you will see again and again. Any number of saints have shared their personal discovery that the catalyst for a continual increase in blessings begins with giving portions of oneself away—of making sacrifices both large and small, always trusting God.

“Your being increases in the measure that you give it away,” Pope St. John Paul said. He called it “the law of the gift.”⁴

Speaking to a group of priests in Rome during the Year of Mercy, Bishop Barron noted that “the law of the gift” can be found “from end-to-end of the Bible.”⁵ Recalling the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well, Bishop Barron said, “to be filled with God is to be filled with love, which is to say, self-emptying. The moment we receive something of the divine grace, we should make of it a gift and then we will receive more of the divine grace. In a word, our being ‘will increase in the measure that we give it away.’ This is the ‘water welling up to eternal life’ that Jesus speaks of.”

Christ himself spelled this out during his Sermon on the Mount:

Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you. (Lk 6:38)

Here Jesus is describing something his first-century assembly would have easily related to and understood. When someone sought to purchase grain from a merchant, the merchant would not simply fill their container and send them on their way. He would pour some grain, then press it down tightly, compressing it, shaking the container so that every corner of the container was full, and any errant stones or larger objects that had risen to the top would be discarded. The merchant would then add more grain, press and shake it down again, over and over, until every possible space in the container was filled and not one further speck of grain could fit.

That was considered the “good measure,” and this is the measure of return we may depend upon from the Lord in response to our sacrifices, whatever their size.

When we make our individual contributions to the Mass—when we add our “matter” to the rest of the collected material gifts—we are (literally) making a testament to our own matter and measure of trust. That’s worth keeping in mind as we try to grow in our spiritual lives, where gratitude and trust are the two things we so easily lose sight of in our day-to-day living. As we prepare for the intensely intimate encounter with Christ, it is good to remember that we can trust him, and that whatever our container of trust looks like, he will fill it to overflowing, so that we can learn to trust ever more. This is a mystery even King Solomon recognized as he wrote, “One person is lavish yet grows still richer; another is too sparing, yet is the poorer...” (Prov 11:24)

It should be said that this examination of our trust is not strictly about material generosity; it’s about every sort of sacrifice we make for the sake of God, and for the sake of love.



Think of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, whose “little way” involved the very smallest things, like making a sacrifice of her aggravation with another nun in her monastery by choosing to smile at the older nun’s grouching, instead of giving in to resentment.⁶ Our generous choices—to share, to help, to put-up-with—they all come back to us as blessings, and in such abundance that we cannot contain them within ourselves. They will necessarily overflow from us, by the action of the Holy Spirit, and then we are living in a kind of endless repeat cycle of sacrifice, blessing, and continual abundance.

The world is thereby enhanced by our sacrifices, individually and collectively, through our gifts at every Mass. In this action of returning to the Creator these things of Creation and these representations of our lives and our very selves, we are “fulfilling our deepest purpose” in giving right worship.

Bishop Barron takes pains to emphasize that the Creator does not have need of our sacrifices. *We* need them though, for the catalytic-conversion effect that the action of sacrifice has on our own lives. God told the prophets, quite sensibly, that he had no need of our sacrifices at all. “*What do I care for the multitude of your sacrifices?*” he asked Isaiah (Isa 1:11). “*For it is loyalty I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings,*” he told Hosea (Hosea 6:6).

Yet in the preparation of the gifts and our contribution to it, “We are preparing,” says Bishop Barron, “for the sacrificial aspect of the Mass.” And the Mass is a fulfillment of our sacrificial impulses. Here we are, offering our gifts heavenward, even as we humbly recognize that nothing we have could ever be a suitable or worthy offering to the God of all Creation.

The offering is an ancient human instinct—perhaps because something within us needs to “make things right,” so to speak, or to “settle accounts” in our meager way. “*We need sacrifice,*” Barron says. “The logic of sacrifice is actually pretty straightforward. We take some aspect of creation, and we return it to God as a sign of love, of thanksgiving, of sorrow, or for expiation. The act of returning to God what God has given us sets us right. It returns our lives to God, and our being ends up increased.”



PREPARING FOR CONSECRATION

Once the priest receives the gifts and brings them to the altar, the great prayer of consecration is about to begin. Showing the bread by elevation, the priest prays the *berakha* in a fashion very similar to how Jesus might have prayed when blessing the Passover meal. “*Baruch Atah Adonai...*” translates to the very words with which he begins, “Blessed are you, Lord...”

The offering continues, “Through your goodness we have this bread to offer...” At its end the congregation affirms that blessing by responding, “Blessed be God forever.”

Then laying the bread aside on a paten, the celebrant adds a small amount of water to the wine in the chalice and prays: “By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”

Abbot Jeremy Driscoll points out that diluting wine with water was a practice common in the ancient world, but—in one of those *mysterions*, those “concrete somethings”—the mixing of the two elements became powerfully symbolic “for understanding our Communion with the sacrifice of Christ. Of the two elements, wine and water, wine is more precious, and so let it represent divinity. The water placed in the wine represents our poor humanity, which will be completely joined to Christ’s divinity in the course of what follows. “To offer the wine without water, said St. Cyprian in the third century, would be “like offering Christ without his people.”⁷

The priest raises the chalice containing the water commingled with wine and prays again, “Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the wine we offer you. Fruit of the vine and work of human hands, it will become our spiritual drink.”

Again, we respond, “Blessed be God, forever.” We are moving into the most solemn moment of the Mass, when Christ becomes truly Present among us.

But first, the priest takes time for a small but lovely ritual that constitutes the third “cleansing” action performed in the Mass. The first, recall, was the casting of incense into the worship space, over the congregation and around the altar that, among other things, purifies the area. The second was the cleansing effect of the Penitential Rite, which frees us from the effect of venial sins. The third occurs now, as altar servers approach with water, dish, and towel. The server bows and pours the water over the celebrant’s hands. “Lord, wash away my iniquities and cleanse me from my sins,” the priest will pray.



The practice of hand washing at this moment began as a necessity. In the early church, the gifts received would involve not just bread and wine but foodstuffs and animals, so washing the hands was fully necessary before the Mass could continue. It continues today as a meaningful and humbling reminder to the celebrant that he too is a sinner acting *in persona Christi* by the sheer grace of God. “It never fails to grab my attention,” Bishop Barron admits. It makes him, “fully aware of all of my sins and limitations.”

His hands cleansed and his focus fixed, the celebrant issues an invitation to the assembly, and it is one that Bishop Barron calls “massively important.” Having raised the bread and wine to God in thanksgiving, the priest now urges the assembly, “Pray, brothers and sisters, that *my sacrifice and yours* may be acceptable to God, the Almighty Father” (emphasis added).

The people rise and respond, “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands, for the praise and glory of his name, for our good, and the good of his holy church.”

It can sound like a throwaway line, but in truth the formula of the Mass, like the Gospel itself, contains no errant or extraneous words. This exchange, says Bishop Barron, “is a hinge for the whole Mass.” It not only continues the call-and-response aspects begun in the Liturgy of the Word, but it acknowledges the Body of Christ that is the Church “forming itself as one.”

It is the priest, operating *in persona Christi*, leading the members of the mystical body to offer sacrifice, as one, to the Father.

Bishop Barron says this is humanity doing “what it is supposed to do for its own good” because we know that what we give to God is *made better for the giving*, and it comes back to us in some way changed, transformed, enhanced. As an example, consider how many parents have watched their sons and daughters pursue religious vocations or the priesthood and have discovered that—rather than “losing” the child—they have experienced an enlargement of their own parenthood and its subsequent blessings through their child’s new community or diocese.

As Barron has reminded us several times, God doesn’t need any of this. But because we are making this offering, the sacrifice will return to us “enhanced, transformed”—*transubstantiated* actually. It comes back to us as the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ, because, “What we give to God returns to us 30, 60, and 100-fold.”



THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

The great Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass begins with what Bishop Barron entertainingly calls an almost militaristic preface, a “snap to attention” called by the priest and responded to by the faithful:

(Priest:) “The Lord be with you.”

“And with your spirit.”

“Lift up your hearts.”

“We lift them up to the Lord.”

“Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God.”

“It is right and just.”

With this exchange, we are once again affirming the Christly persona in which the priest is operating and calling it forth from him.

In addition, the exhortation to lift up our hearts symbolically brings us to “the mountain of the Lord.” It is from this place, this “mountain,” Bishop Barron again shows us that our formulas are not merely pretty words; all of them have depths of meaning we need to appreciate. “We lift [our hearts] up,” he says. But, why?

“The Garden of Eden, in the poetic imagination of the author of Genesis, was a mountain.” We know that “because the rivers flow forth from it, from a height. Where was the Law given, but on Mount Sinai? Where was the Temple built, but on Mount Zion. Where was the Transfiguration? On Mount Tabor. Where was the Crucifixion? On Mount Calvary. Mountains are places of heightened consciousnesses, where humanity and divinity meet.” When we say we are lifting our hearts, we are going up the Holy Mountain. “We’re going to the place of sacrifice, where Christ draws all people, all creation, to himself.”

And there we give our thanks, which is the very meaning of the word “Eucharist” (i.e., thanksgiving).

The preface concludes by joining our voices, our praise, and our thanksgiving to the worship of the heavenly angels as the prophet Isaiah described it.

I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment
filling the temple. Seraphim were stationed above; each of them had six wings:



with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they hovered. One cried out to the other:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts!
All the earth is filled with his glory!” (Isa 6:1-3)

We pray:

Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

We’ve lifted our hearts up, says Bishop Barron, and we’re going past the earthly mountains of Zion, or Sinai, or Tabor, “all the way up to the heavenly place, where the angels continually sing.”

This is not expendable, but the heart of the matter, says Barron.

At this point, the priest remains standing, in the attitude of Christ, and the faithful kneel because we are approaching the climax of the Mass—a moment of absolute adoration.

There are several Eucharistic Prayers, each opening with a word of praise. The celebrant selects the one he feels is most appropriate and relevant to a particular Mass. With any of them, however, the effect is always the same—the prayer brings together the totality of the Church. It reaches back into time to include our spiritual ancestors. Within the Eucharistic Prayer, we are praying together as Church in a moment completely outside of time, and we are calling upon God to do something spectacular.



FIRST EPICLESIS

To “call upon God” is to make an *epiclesis*, and we do that here. In the first epiclesis of this great prayer we are having a “Trinitarian moment,” so to speak. As the priest gestures his hands in a downward movement that reflects the hovering of the Holy Spirit, we are calling upon the Father, the Creator, to

send the Sanctifier, the Spirit, down so that the gifts we have brought to the Altar—the bread and wine—become the Redeemer, Christ the Son.

Remember, all our gifts and sacrifices are returned to us changed, made better, transformed through the action of God. In fact, as we shall see, our offering will be transubstantiated into the best and most perfect of all offerings, the flesh of God's own Incarnate Word, and his most precious Blood.

This prayer of praise and thanksgiving that is raised to God returns as a blessing that comes down from God upon the gift and enriches it. Thanking and praising God thus become blessing and the offering given to God returns to man blessed by the Almighty. The words of the Institution of the Eucharist fit into this context of prayer; in them the praise and blessing of the *berakha* become the blessing and transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus.⁸ – Pope Benedict XVI

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. What do we offer at the Offertory during the Mass? What do these gifts represent? (CCC 1333-34, 1350; Deut 8:18; Prov 3:9; Heb 13:16)
2. What is the purpose of a religious sacrifice? What fulfills and surpasses all Old Testament sacrifices? (Heb 7:22-27, 10: 8-12; CCC 2099-2100)
3. Why do we call our primary liturgy the “sacrifice of the Mass”? (CCC 1330; Heb 13:14-15; 1 Pet 2:4-5)
4. What is happening spiritually when the celebrant says, “Lift up your hearts” and we respond, “We lift them up to the Lord.” (Matt 15:19; Ezek 36:26-27; Isa 11:9; Ps 99:9; Matt 17:1-3)
5. How does the Sanctus (“Holy, holy, holy Lord God of hosts...”) unite us with heavenly worship? (Isa 6:1-3; Rev 4:6-8; CCC 1090)
6. What is the “law of the gift”? How does transubstantiation perfectly demonstrate this law? (CCC 1375-1376)

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. The commentary mentions that “gratitude and trust are the two things we so easily lose sight of in our day-to-day living.”
 - a. Take a moment each day over the next week and write down three things you are grateful for that day. How does this simple recollecting affect your attitude during the week?
 - b. When do you find it difficult to trust? How would you assess your trust in the promises of Christ?

2. Have you experienced the “cycle of sacrifice, blessing, and continual abundance” in your own life? If so, please describe and share it with others in your discussion group. If not, what do you think needs to change so you can experience it?

3. What have been some of your most memorable “mountain top” experiences, where you felt at peace and in the presence of God?