

Homily for September 4, 2005
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time in the
Year of the Eucharist

By Father Charles Bowes

Ezekiel 33:7-9
Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9
Romans 13:8-10
Matthew 18:15-20

We give more than money at Mass, but the gift money represents is our very selves.

We continue our reflections on the Mass in this Year of the Eucharist initiated by the Pope. This week we reflect on the collection, the gathering of money.

As the ushers came around with the collection basket one Sunday, a small boy leaned over to his father and said, "You don't have to pay for me, Dad. I'm under five." Another youngster, listening to her mother complaining about the quality of the music and the preaching as they left Mass, said, "You have to admit, Mom. It wasn't a bad show for a nickel!"

Both children share the same misconception about the meaning of the collection at Mass. They see it as the price of admission, but there is no admission required here. How might we explain to them what the collection really means?

The official books tell us very little. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal, as it describes the procession with the gifts, simply says: "It is well also that money or other gifts for the poor or for the Church, brought by the faithful or collected in the church, should be received" (#73).

Most pastors and parish finance councils, on the other hand, see the collection as absolutely essential to keeping the parish going. Its practical value is obvious. It takes a lot of money to maintain buildings and programs and to keep the light and heat and air conditioning going.

The role of the collection during Mass, however, goes beyond the practical goal of meeting the annual budget. Remember that the collection takes place during the Preparation of the Gifts, and the money we give is carried forward as part of the procession with the bread and wine. The point of the collection, then, has something to do with preparing ourselves to enter into the sacrifice of Christ.

In our culture, money is a powerful symbol of ourselves. A slang term for money is "bread." The process of getting it and spending it tends to dominate our lives. So when we give some of it back to God, we express our willingness to give ourselves to God.

It is not just a matter of giving God one or two percent of our income, or even of tithing 10 percent to God. In biblical times, the Jews made an offering of the first fruits of the harvest. It was a sign of gratitude for the harvest, but also a symbol that the whole harvest really belonged to God.

What we give in the collection is a symbol of all that we have. It is a reminder that everything we own is a gift from God, and that even our capacity to earn is God's gift as well. Our gift in the collection is both a sign of our gratitude and a symbol that we try to use all of God's gifts as God wills.

Notice, too, that the General Instruction of the Roman Missal speaks of gifts for the poor or for the Church. It is important to remember that our gifts are to do more than ensure our own comfort and our own programs in the parish. At least part of what we give goes to the poor if we are really to imitate our Lord. That's the reason for the special collections mandated by the Archdiocese for missions and for other needs. In this way, too, what we put in the collection prepares us to share in Christ's sacrifice, for it expresses our willingness to care for those in need and to give ourselves to others in love as Jesus did.

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