

## The Preparation of the Altar and Gifts

*The Mass In Slow Motion is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. This series will follow the Mass in order beginning with The Gathering Rite through The Final Blessing and Dismissal, approximately 25 volumes. Previous editions are available via the rectory office or our website: [www.hscchurch.org](http://www.hscchurch.org)*

And now we come to the heart of the matter. As important and precious as the Word of God is, it all points here: the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Word became Flesh and dwelt among us, and now the Word we have heard, Jesus Christ will become the Flesh and Blood we receive. The weekly (actually daily) celebration of the Eucharist distinguishes Catholicism from Protestantism. Most Protestant denominations celebrate the Eucharist once a month or even less. For Catholics, it would be unthinkable to go to Mass on Sunday and not receive Holy Communion. It would be like coming to a dinner party, meeting and greeting all the other guests, exchanging news and then being asked to go home before the meal was ever served. No indeed, Christ gathers us not just to teach us, but also to feed us on his Body and Blood, the necessary food without which we perish (cf John 6:53). Jesus has prepared a table for us in the sight of our enemy, the devil, our cup is overflowing (cf Ps 23).



At the Last Supper Christ instituted the paschal sacrifice and meal. In this meal the sacrifice of the cross is continually made present in the Church when the priest, representing Christ, carries out what the Lord did and commanded his disciples to do in his memory. Christ took bread and the cup, gave thanks, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples saying, “Take and eat, this is my body. Take and drink, this is my blood. Do this in memory of me.” The Church has arranged the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy to correspond to these words and actions of Christ:

1. In the preparation of the gifts, bread, wine and water are brought to the altar, the same elements which Christ used.
2. The Eucharistic prayer is the hymn of thanksgiving to God for the whole work of salvation; the offerings become the Body and Blood of Christ. It echoes the priestly prayer that Jesus spoke at the Last Supper and which John’s Gospel records extensively.
3. The breaking of the bread is a sign of the unity of the faithful, and in communion they receive the Body and Blood of Christ as the apostles did from his hands.

**Focus** – The focus of the Mass now shifts from the Lectern and the celebrant’s chair to the altar which is about to be prepared. This is a visual indication that a new part of the Mass is about to begin.

**Preparations** – It should be evident that the opening movements of the Liturgy of the Eucharist are essentially a practical matter. The altar is prepared and gifts are brought forward and offered. While there are prayers and some accompanying ritual gestures, it will be noticed that the rite is almost stark in its simplicity and very task oriented. But this does not mean it is without symbolism and as we shall see there has been an instinctive elaboration of the offertory to follow through processions and the like. This expresses a basic religious need, namely that in giving of the essentials of life for a sacrifice, the giver gives himself and so wants to be part of the act of offering.



**First the altar is prepared as the center of the Eucharistic liturgy.** The altar is the center of the entire Liturgy of the Eucharist. The style of the altar has varied much over the centuries, from elaborate baroque altars (see left) to those that resemble merely a simple table (see above, right). The present day directives indicate that the altar should ideally be freestanding (that is, not anchored up against a wall) and in such a way that it can be easily circled and that the celebration can be carried on facing the people. This tends to point to a simpler design for the altar at least indirectly.

Note that the altar is to be covered with a cloth. The design and style of this cloth will vary with the design of the altar. The front may or may not be covered but the top surface of the altar is to be covered by at least one cloth. Surely there is a nodding to the meal experience here. We seldom eat a meal, at least formal ones, on a bare table top. The altar cloths also make allusion to Christ’s burial cloth and thus also points to the sacrificial nature of the Mass. The rubric above seems to imply that the altar has been covered all along. Today the cloth is usually left upon the altar but in the earliest days it was more the custom to remove it after Mass. This is still done on Holy Thursday and Good Friday, but as a general rule, the altar stays covered even when it is not in use. The altar in every church should ordinarily be a fixed altar located in such a way as to be the focal point on which the whole congregation naturally centers. A fixed altar is one that is immovable. A pastoral reflection on this would be that the altar, as well as the pulpit, represent perpetual values that do not change and hence, their fixed location should reflect that fact. Likewise, this will prevent us from the somewhat embarrassing

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temptation of moving them when they “get in the way” of some assembly or concert in the church. Not all these norms can be perfectly observed in older churches which have fixed altars from a previous period which are not free-standing but are attached to the back wall.

The practice of placing within the altar, relics of the saints is to be maintained. This is a traditional practice and it helps us to appreciate the communion of the saints which is most perfectly experienced in this life during Holy Mass and Communion. On the altar are placed the corporal, the purificator, the chalice, and the sacramentary. Each of these is discussed in turn.



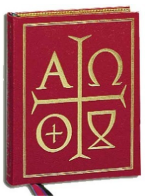
**The Corporal** is a square linen cloth (usually 12 to 15 inches square) which is placed in the center of the altar along the back edge. It gets its name from the Latin word “Corpus” (Body) since it is upon this cloth that the paten and the chalice containing the Lord’s Body and Blood rest. The purpose of this cloth is to help in catching any small particles of the host or drops of the precious blood. At the end of the mass, the corporal is carefully folded so that any particles will not fall to the ground or be scattered upon the altar cloth. This is important because, the Lord is contained even in the smallest particles of the sacred species and should be thus treated with the greatest reverence. The corporal normally rests on the altar only during mass and is reverently removed after communion. The picture at left shows a corporal upon which rests a chalice. The square covering over the chalice is called a pall (see below).



**The Purificator** is another piece of cloth, more narrow than the corporal. This gets its name from the Latin verb “purificare” (to purify) since it is used to help cleanse the sacred vessels. Since, once again, we are handling the sacred Body and Blood of the Lord, a special cloth is used which will later be laundered in a special and reverent way. Note how every care is taken to reverently handle even the smallest portions of the sacred species.



**The Chalice** gets its name from the Latin (via the French) word Calix which means literally, “cup” but in English the word has the special meaning directed toward the special cup in which will be contained the precious Blood. Therefore, as a general rule it is not an everyday cup nor does it merely resemble one. Indeed, all the sacred vessels hold places of honor, especially the chalice and paten since they are used in presenting and consecrating the sacred species. They should be made of solid materials which are considered noble in a particular region. Likewise, they should not be easily breakable. Understandably, they should also be of a material that is non-absorbent at least insofar as the inside of the cup. Lastly, the sacred vessels must be blessed by a bishop or a priest. This sets them aside for the Lord and they should never thus be used for profane purposes. Indeed, the form of the vessels should be suited to sacred use and be considered appropriate for divine worship. Use is not to be made of simple baskets or receptacles which are more ordinarily meant for use outside of sacred celebrations. Simple pottery, as a general rule, would seem to be inappropriate. Consider that in our region, few people who held a formal dinner would think to set out pottery. This is not a general practice in our region because it is considered inelegant. So much more so for the Mass, which is no mere cookout. It is also important to distinguish the sacred from the profane. Thus, Chalices that resemble secular wine glasses or cocktail glasses might also need to be discouraged. This is at least the case with the principal vessel. There are judgement calls to be made here and thus, the rules are not hard and fast, but open to some interpretation. Nevertheless, there should be sensitivity to the congregations expectations and perceptions of what is used. “The Chalice should be covered with a veil, which may always be white.” Once the chalice is brought to the altar and readied for use, it is unveiled. The practice of covering the chalice is less often seen today. Nevertheless, it is an ancient custom and emerges from reverence due the sacred vessels. Traditionally they were kept covered when not in use.



**The Missal** is the book containing the formulas and rites for the celebration of Mass together with the text of the ordinary (the texts which remain the same in every Mass) and the propers (the texts which vary with each Mass). It also contains Masses for special occasions and various blessings. The Missal in the form we know it today does not contain the readings for the Mass of the day. These are contained in a separate book called the Lectionary. However, in times past, the readings were also included in the Missal. Generally, in English we no longer refer to the book as the “missal” (although its Latin title still remains “Missale Romanum”) but instead call it the “Sacramentary.” It is the book used only by the celebrant. In the Older Tridentine Mass the Book was on the Altar from the beginning of the Mass to the end. But, in the current liturgy the Altar is not formally “used” until the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Hence, the placing of the Missal on the Altar, which had formerly been at the celebrant’s chair for the Liturgy of the Word, demonstrates again the opening of the second major portion of the Mass whose focus of action is the Altar. The Missal is the authoritative source for all liturgical actions of the Mass and must be faithfully followed. This is essential if the Mass is truly to be our source and sign of unity. The Mass belongs to the whole Church and not to an individual priest or congregation. Hence, to alter it is to move against the universal unity of the Church. There are many pastoral problems that can arise due to tampering with the norms and directives or prayers in the missal.