

The Mass In Slow Motion

Volume—18

The Priest Washes His Hands

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.

Washing of the hands—Didn't Father wash his hands before Mass? What's he doing that NOW for? Maybe he sneezed or something! Or maybe he accidentally touched something that was dirty?

Well, in modern times we place a great deal of emphasis on cleanliness. We have bacteria in mind and consider washing necessary to preserve good health and prevent the spread of sickness. But the ancient world knew very little of bacteria and washing to prevent disease. To the ancients washing was for the removal of dirt to be sure but it was also a symbol of purification. So, when the priest washes his hands he says rather unusual words: "Lord wash away my iniquity and cleanse me of my sins." Notice there is nothing in these words about the body at all. The washing of the hands is a symbol of the priest's need to have his soul cleansed that he may undertake a holy task. He may or may not have dirty hands, but this is really not the essential point which is that he should have a desire for inward purification before daring so holy a task. It is thus an egregious omission to not wash the hands. The washing of the hands should never be omitted for reasons it is now hoped are obvious. The priest washes his hands at the side of the altar saying the prescribed prayer quietly. The minister pours the water.



The history of this practice is indeed ancient. The Jewish faith prescribed many ritual washings and included were washings that took place at or in proximity to the meal. There was certainly a practical aspect to this washing in earlier days of the Mass. After handling the many gifts brought forward, the priest's hands would easily be soiled and this washing thus had a practical aspect. However, some dispute this claim since the ritual sometimes took place before the offerings were brought forward. At any rate, today the rite has an essentially symbolic role wherein the priest recalls his need to be cleansed interiorly and that he shares in the need for forgiveness and redemption.

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