INSERT # 3: The Liturgy of the Eucharist

As we continue our reflections on the connections between Liturgy and justice, we will focus on three of the major components of the Liturgy of the Eucharist: the Preparation of the Gifts, the Eucharistic Prayer, and the Communion Rite itself.

From early on, Christians brought along with the bread and wine for the Eucharist, gifts to share with those in need, the custom of “collection”. People literally gave something of their own as part of the offering at the altar—bread, wine, olive oil, a chicken, etc… (literally, “the work of human hands”) While some of the bread and wine was chosen for liturgy itself, the rest (after a blessing) with other items was laid aside on tables for the poor and needy. (This was, by the way, one reason for the practice of hand washing on the part of the presider.) St Justin Martyr in his First Apologia, written around the year 153, said:

Those who are well off, and who are also willing, give as each chooses. What is gathered is given to him who presides to assist orphans and widows, those whom illness or any other cause has deprived of resources: prisoners, immigrants and in a word, all who are in need.

This was active liturgical participation at its best. Have we lost this connection in our practice today? What about the way we take up the collection: what does our current practice signify? Is it about collecting only that which supports the Church? How might we better do what the earlier church practice did in terms of expressing the social justice implications of this part of the Mass? Given that the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (the official guide to how the Mass should be celebrated), says when it describes the Preparation of Gifts that “It is well also that money or other gifts for the poor or for the Church be brought by the faithful” (#73), these are certainly questions worth pondering.

If we listen carefully to any of our Eucharistic prayers, which recall and make present God’s saving actions, especially in the death and resurrection of Christ, we hear proclaimed the universal significance and social justice implications of the Eucharistic sacrifice for the whole world:

Lord, may this sacrifice which has made our peace with you advance the peace and salvation of all the world.

According to our Catholic teaching, salvation is not understood solely in spiritual terms; that is, “getting our souls to heaven”, but is also physical and material, having to do with the here and now as well as one’s eternal destiny. Salvation is not just an individual matter, but social: having to do with economics, work, trade, and international relations. The Church understands the salvation Christ brings to be intimately connected with the full liberation and well being of each human person, which only true justice can insure.
Justice, defined as “right relationship”, is at the heart of what Christ established between God and us and effects a “right relationship” with God and between people as well, a full “at-one-ment”.

In the Communion Rite, we participate in the Eucharistic meal whereby Christ Himself becomes our very food and drink. It doesn’t take much of a stretch to see the intimate connection between this sacred meal and the hungers of the world, between the holy bread we eat and the bread needed by millions of children everyday. The Catechism of the Catholic Church in its teaching about the Eucharist puts it very bluntly:

*The Eucharist commits us to the poor. To receive in truth the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we must recognize Christ in the poorest, His brothers and sisters.” (#1397)*

St. John Chrysostom, spoke these challenging words in the 300’s: “What good is it if the Eucharistic table is overloaded with golden chalices while a fellow human being is dying of hunger”

Pedro Arrupe, S.J., former General Superior of the Jesuit order wrote these powerful words a few years back:

“If there is hunger anywhere in the world, then our celebration of the Eucharist is incomplete everywhere in the world”.

Our own U.S. Bishops in their 2004 document, “A Place at the Table,” teach us that:

“When we gather as Catholics to worship, we gather around a table to celebrate the Eucharist. It is Christ’s sacrificial meal that nourishes us so that can go forth to live the Gospel as His disciples. Too often, the call of the Gospel and the social implications of the Eucharist are ignored or neglected in our daily lives. As Catholics, we can no longer tolerate the moral scandal of poverty in our land and so much hunger and deprivation in our world.”

This social awareness might well change the way we pray… “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you” How can any of us be worthy when through our many omissions we fail to act or advocate for our millions of sisters and brothers in such need? Perhaps a healthy social guilt will prompt us to action? Such awareness also has profound significance when we give our “Amen” to the reception of Christ. This “Amen”, or “yes”, commits us to feed the hungers and thirsts of our sisters and brothers in the world? It is not enough to simply feed on Jesus. If we just receive Holy Communion without the works of charity and justice, we can easily fall into a kind of “spiritual obesity”. Like food, the Eucharist is meant to provide energy for action. We know all too well that eating without exercise creates a number of health problems.

While sharing in the meal of Eucharist is an intimate meeting with the Lord, it can’t remain a “me and Jesus” experience alone. Partaking in Communion is a profound act of solidarity, one of the major principles of Catholic Social Justice teaching. Our late Holy Father, John Paul II, said it so well in his “2005 World Day of Peace” message just a few months before his death:

“May the Church find in this supreme sacrament of love the wellspring of all communion: communion with Jesus the Redeemer & in Him, with every human being. In a word, by sharing in the one bread and the one cup, we come to recognize one another as brothers and sisters, despite every difference of language, nationality & culture. We come to realize that we are God’s family & together we can build a world based on the values of justice, freedom, and peace”.

It is with this deeper understanding of the Eucharist that what we do at the Dismissal Rite begins to make sense. We’ll address this in our final insert.