

Seventeenth Sunday Per Annum (B)

July, 26, 2015. *Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted (Jn. 6:8).*

Today we begin to read from the sixth chapter of St. John's Gospel which includes Our Lord's Eucharistic discourse and we continue our meditations on the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, our central act of worship, *the source and summit of Christian life* (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10; Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Vatican Council II); the very heart of all that the Church is and does. *The liturgy has two purposes: to worship God with all due reverence and love, and to feed, nurture, shape, and perfect the worshipper* (Peter Kwasniewski, *Resurgent in the Midst of Crisis*, p. 72-73). We have already considered the importance of the introductory rites of the Mass, namely the Penitential Rite, as a worthy preparation for an attentive listening to the Word of God; and the importance also of the homily or sermon as an integral part of our worship and the principal means of our ongoing instruction and formation in the faith. The recitation of the Creed marks the end of the part of the Mass which in the Extraordinary Form is called the *Mass of the Catechumens*. What follows the Creed in the Ordinary Form of the Roman Rite is the Prayer of the Faithful. Although strictly speaking this is part of the what is generally referred to as the Liturgy of the Word, this Universal Prayer is rightly seen as an exercise of the priesthood of the faithful which is ours through Baptism and for this reason it serves as point of transition to the Liturgy of the Eucharist or what in the Tridentine Rite is called the *Mass of the Faithful*.

The Epistle to the Hebrews is, as we have noted, a sacred text which outlines the continuity between the Old and the New Covenants in the worship given to God. It says of Our Lord that *in the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears...[and that he] was designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek* (5:7-10). In the Prayer of the Faithful we likewise offer up prayers and supplications not only for our own particular needs but also for the world and the salvation of mankind; mindful that *the salvation of the many depends on the prayers and the voluntary penances which the members of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ offer for this intention* (Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, 29 June 1943). The scope of our prayer embraces the whole world, for we join our prayers and sacrifices to the prayer of Christ the Eternal High Priest. This exercise of the priesthood of the faithful prepares us for the Offertory of the Mass, the first part of the *Mass of the Faithful*.

It is at this point in the Mass that the bread and wine which will become Our Lord's Body and Blood are brought to the Altar along with the offerings of the faithful. The collection which is customarily taken up on Sundays is the sacrificial expression of both our prayer as well as an expression of our gratitude for blessings received. These offerings which enable us to sanctify our work are the source of untold good for those whom the Church serves. It is an undeniable fact that the Catholic Church is the most generous servant of humanity and our service goes beyond providing food and shelter and alleviating material poverty. Our churches throughout the world are more than functional places where we gather to worship. From the greatest and most ornate cathedrals to humble parish churches like ours, these sacred edifices are meant to reflect the holiness of beauty and the beauty of holiness. Here our spiritual poverty is remedied and this too is a service to humanity. Those who are tempted to dismiss and reproach what some mistakenly characterise as extravagance in the beauty of sacred worship, forget that *man does not live by bread alone* and that the worship we give to God should be noble and beautiful. Rich and poor alike share in the beauty of holiness.

The Offertory Prayers of the Traditional Rite of the Mass unambiguously express the sacrificial nature of the Mass and the intercessory role of the Priest at the Altar. This is beautifully reflected in the prayer that accompanies the offering of the host: *Receive, O holy Father, almighty and eternal God, this spotless host, which I, Thy unworthy servant, offer unto Thee, my living and true God, for mine own countless sins, offences and negligences, and for all here present; as also for all faithful Christians living and dead, that it may avail both for my own and their salvation unto life eternal. Amen.* You may have noticed that before the wine is offered, the priest pours a bit of water in the wine. The wine represents Our Lord's divine nature, while the drop of water that is mixed with it represents His human nature – and with it ourselves. Just as the two are mingled in the chalice and can no longer be separated, by joining our sacrifice to the one being offered on the Altar, we hope to become one with Christ through the Eucharist. In solemn Masses the offerings of bread and wine are incensed along with the Altar and all those present. Just as Mary Magdalene anointed Our Lord's feet with costly ointment, we *cloud in fragrance* our offering and all those participating in it. Incense is an aromatic resin. In the ancient world it was a very costly sacrifice and in the Temple in Jerusalem it was burned twice daily on a special altar; and on the Day of Atonement coals from this altar as well as incense were taken into the Holy of Holies where it was burned in solemn ceremony. In the Book of Revelation where we are given a vision of the Heavenly Liturgy we read: *And another angel came, and stood before the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne; and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God (8:3-4).*

As the priest incenses the Altar in a solemn Mass, he prays these words from Psalm 140: *Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.* The Offertory ends with an invitation to prayer expressing what is about to take place: *Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the almighty Father.* The prayer rightly distinguishes the two sacrifices about to be offered. The priest is about to re-present Christ's Sacrifice on the Altar. The Mass is Calvary. In the Mass Our Lord offers the perfect Sacrifice for us and we join our own sacrifices with His; uniting ourselves with the Host upon the Altar; our prayers, offerings and sacrifices are thereby imbued with a power and efficacy that enables us to say, *I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me (Gal. 2:20).* This is fully conscious and active participation at Mass and for this reason, it is the most effective manner of assisting at Holy Mass, of praying the Mass, and of living the Mass. The Church teaches us that *in the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 8).* The Prayer over the Offerings of our Mass today, expresses what takes place at every Mass at the Offertory, the first part of the *Mass of the Faithful. Accept, O Lord, we pray, the offerings which we bring from the abundance of your gifts, that through the powerful working of your grace these most sacred mysteries may sanctify our present way of life and lead us to eternal gladness (Seventeenth Sunday Per Annum, Prayer over the Offerings, The Roman Missal).*