



Deeper Waters

Preparing Gifts of Bread and Wine

“Deeper Waters” column for November, 2007

By Julie McCarty

Bags of clothes, sorted out months ago, sit in my basement, waiting to be given to those in need. Certain cupboards are bursting at the seams—I can’t even close my sock drawer all the way. Two old cell phones, forced into early retirement when my husband and I were talked into “moving up” rather than buy new batteries, lie abandoned, despite our intention to donate them to a place that helps domestic abuse victims. (Old cell phones can still be used to dial 9-1-1.)

Christians of Long Ago

If I was living in eighth century Rome, I might be wondering if I ought to receive Holy Communion on Sunday. Why? Because offering gifts of bread and wine for use in liturgy was intimately connected with offering assistance to the poor.

Various historical documents provide clues to this connection, including ancient manuscripts of the “Ordo Romanus Primus.” This liturgical document, written around 700 AD, describes practical details of how Mass was to be celebrated when the pope visited the local church.

Among other things, detailed instructions are given for how to gather all the gifts of bread and wine from the faithful. At this time in history, rather than have two people bring bread and wine up the aisle in procession, the entire congregation brought loaves of bread and/or wine from their homes.

To gather the many gifts in an orderly fashion was no simple feat. It began when the pope, accompanied by assistants, would walk to the section of the church in which were seated princes and other government dignitaries, to receive their loaves of bread. The pope handed each loaf to the district subdeacon, who then handed it to another subdeacon, who in turn placed it in a large linen cloth held by two acolytes.

After this, the pope went to the “women’s section” to receive their loaves of bread. As this was happening, other clergy gathered bread from other sections of the church. At this time, too, the archdeacon began to collect the wine from the nobles, brought to him in little flasks and poured into a larger chalice. When the chalice became full, the contents were then poured into a much larger bowl, held by yet another liturgical minister.

(Mixing the wines together certainly makes a statement of oneness. I wonder how it looked and tasted.)

When this long gathering process was completed, deacons prepared the altar, selecting a portion of the bread and wine to be used for this Eucharistic celebration. A pitcher of water was provided by the choir, who had been singing as the gifts were gathered.

What about the rest of the bread and wine? Based on what we are told, there must have been mountains of bread and many large containers of wine. Scholars tell us that a portion of the unconsecrated bread and wine would have been used to support the clergy. The vast majority of it was given away to the poor. (Did they think of Jesus feeding the multitudes?)

Pondering the gifts of bread and wine

I don't recall ever thinking about food for the poor when I see lay persons bring forward gifts of bread and wine at Mass. Yet, the current General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2003) continues to see a connection between gifts of bread and wine for the Eucharistic celebration with gifts for the poor (see GIRM, no. 73).

Blessed Mother Teresa had a beautiful way of describing this relationship. "In Holy Communion," she taught, "we have Christ under the appearance of Bread. In our work [with the poor] we find him under the appearance of flesh and blood. It is the same Christ."

As I sit here writing this, it's a Friday. I'm putting those bags of clothes and old cell phones by the garage door, so this midlife brain of mine can remember to drive them to their new homes tomorrow. What better way to prepare for Sunday Mass?

For reflection:

--How did Christ treat the poor? How did he assist them?

--Spend some time pondering the above quote from Blessed Mother Teresa.



About the columnist:

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