

The Collection

One of the features of the Offertory in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, which doesn't happen at every Mass, like it doesn't happen at daily Mass, but is common custom at Sunday Masses, is the Collection. You have probably noticed that when the altar is being prepared and the gifts are being brought up and presented to the priest and deacon, that oftentimes it's become customary for ushers to collect monetary gifts from the faithful at this point in the liturgy. So sure enough, if you look in the Roman Missal and you look at the *General Instruction on the Missal*, which is the book of norms and rules at the beginning of the Missal, paragraph 73 does encourage the practice of the collection taking place at the Offertory. So let's just see what the Church says here:

The offerings are then brought forward. It is praiseworthy for the bread and wine to be presented by the faithful. . . . *Even money or other gifts for the poor or for the Church, brought by the faithful or collected in the church, are acceptable*; given their purpose, they are to be put in a suitable place away from the Eucharistic table.¹

So notice, what the Church is saying here is that when the gifts are being brought forward to be offered on the altar, at that time money can be given as well, both for the poor and for the Church, right? Although it, unlike the bread and wine, is not to be placed on the altar of sacrifice. So the question is why? Why is the collection part of the liturgy of the Offertory in particular? Why not do the collection at the beginning of Mass, or do the collection at the end of Mass? Why does the Church tie the collection here of monetary gifts to the Offertory in particular, to the offering of bread and wine? Isn't that kind of inappropriate, some people might say, to attach the offering of money to the offering of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, you know, to the elements of bread and wine that are going to be changed into the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ. What's going on here? And maybe you've had this experience too. Some people will feel like the Church is taking advantage of the fact that they're at Mass to kind of hit them up for money during this part of the Eucharistic liturgy. That's a more cynical approach, but it does raise the

¹ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 73.

question, why do we do this? Why do we have a collection at Sunday Mass and why does it take place during the Offertory? Where is its in Scripture? Is it in Scripture? And where is it in the tradition of the Church.

So let's answer that question by looking at the history of sacrifice and the history of the Mass in the Bible and in the Roman tradition in particular. So let's go back to the first man to be called a priest in the Old Testament. In the book of Genesis 14, we've seen this before, we've looked at it several times, but we want to look at it again. It's the account of Melchizedek offering a sacrifice of bread and wine after Abraham has a victory over the kings of Sodom and rescues Lot. And if you notice, in that account, it's going to say not only that Melchizedek brought bread and wine to offer to God, just like we do in the Offertory, it's also going to say that Abraham gave money. Listen to the Biblical account:

*And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.*² (Genesis 14:18-20)

So pause. What does that mean, a tenth of everything? Well, in this case, it's the spoils of war. So Abram has conquered the kings of the land who captured Lot, his brother, and he has taken the spoils of war from them, as was the custom at this time of ancient warfare in the ancient Israelite context and ancient Hebrew context, and so he takes a tenth of the spoils, and he's going to present them to Melchizedek. Who, by the way, isn't just a priest, He's also a king. He's the king of Salem. Melchizedek the name actually means king of righteousness and he's king of Salem, which by the way in Jewish tradition is going to be later identified with Jerusalem. So, in effect here, Abram — this is important — is recognizing Melchizedek's superiority over him because in effect he's giving a tithe to him. Just like in the ancient world and today you pay taxes to the governor or to the

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

government, so too in ancient times you would give taxes and tithes to priests and kings. And Melchizedek is both. So Abram gives him a tithe, a tenth of everything.

So this first example we have here of a sacrifice being offered in the Old Testament by a man explicitly identified as a priest — and not just any sacrifice, a sacrifice of bread and wine — is already attached to the collection and offering of money in addition to the gifts that are going to be placed on the altar. So, especially you priests out there who are watching, just remind Catholics who might be reluctant to participate in the collection; the collection is about as ancient and Biblical as it gets because it goes all the way back to the book of Genesis.

Now, it doesn't stop in Genesis though. If you continue to read through the books of the Pentateuch, the Law of Moses, the custom of tithing, in other words, of offering money in addition to the sacrifices of bread or wine or bulls or goats, is very ancient and very Biblical. So for example, in the book of Deuteronomy 14, there's a description of the tithes that would be offered by the people of Israel. The book of Deuteronomy describes this bringing of the tithes as follows:

At the end of every three years you shall bring forth all the tithe of your produce in the same year, and lay it up within your towns; and the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled; that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do. (Deuteronomy 14:28)

Okay, so here we see something interesting. What the book of Deuteronomy is saying is when you bring your sacrifices to the Temple, one of the things you're also going to bring with you is a tenth of your produce, right? So this is an agricultural society. The way you provide for your family is to work the land, and the first fruits of your harvest is going to be the most valuable and important part of the harvest, right? Especially since you might not get second fruits or third fruits. So bringing a tithe, a tenth of the portion of the produce, was part of the Law of Moses, that you would bring that and give it to the priests and to the Temple, or the Tabernacle in this case, before the Temple is actually built. And what is that produce for? It's going to have several people who will be the beneficiaries of your

gift. First is going to be the Levites. Remember, the Levites are the tribe who worked the Tabernacle. They were dedicated to the Tabernacle. In order to be a priest, you had to be a member of the tribe of Levi. To be a high priest, you had to be a descendant of Aaron, who was a Levite, and then to assist in the Tabernacle you had to be a member of the same tribe, And one of the stipulations that God has for Israel at the time of Moses and then David as well is that the Levitical tribe doesn't own land in the same way that the other tribes had an allotment of land. Their inheritance according to God is Him, and not just Him, but the Tabernacle itself. So their land, their portion is the sanctuary. It is Him, He is their inheritance. So it's fitting that if they don't have the means of production and the means of, you know, benefiting from the land that the other twelve tribes had, that the people of Israel, when they have their crops and they harvest their fields, that they bring the tithe, the tenth of their income from the land and offer it firstly to the Levite, to the priests, so that they can provide for themselves and their families as well.

Then it would also be given to the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow. Who are these? Basically, these are immigrants, orphans and women whose husbands had died. These would be the three most vulnerable people in the land of Israel, right? If you're an immigrant or sojourner, you come into the land, you don't have family ties, you don't have the kind of protections that someone with an extended family network has. So you're going to be vulnerable to robbery and to other forms of abuse. Same thing with orphans, right? Little children, they can't provide for themselves. They need someone to care for them and to protect them. And widows as well. If their husbands have died, their means of income and provision through their husbands has ceased. And so repeatedly in the book of Moses there's going to be a command for the people of Israel, what we would call the laity, to provide monetarily for these three groups: immigrants, orphans and widows, right? So when you would bring forth the tithe, this collection of your produce, and you would give it, it would be either for the priest or the Tabernacle, for its upkeep and the Temple eventually, or for the poor, for the widows, orphans and immigrants, the sojourners in the land of Israel. And God's going to repeatedly remind the Israelites, "you too were sojourners in the land of Egypt." That wasn't your home country. So you need to treat sojourners in your land with charity by providing for them out of your means, especially through your tithing, through the collection of money.

Now, that's the Old Testament. It's just a couple of examples, but you can already see that the idea of collecting monetary offerings in addition to animal sacrifices or bread and wine sacrifices is just everywhere. It's part and parcel of the ancient Israelite religion. And if you fast forward to Jesus' day, by his day it's not only going to be known as the tithe, but it will also be tied to what is known as almsgiving. So providing for the orphan and the sojourner and the widow through giving alms to the poor was a part of Jewish custom and Jewish piety at the time of Jesus. And just to give you one example of this, in Matthew 6 in the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus is going to famously tell his disciples:

Thus, *when you give alms*, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. *But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing*, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:2-4)

The point I want to emphasize here is, you'll notice, Jesus does not say if you give alms, He says when you give alms because He's assuming his Jewish audience and his Jewish disciples are going to be involved in this practice of not only making bread and wine or animal gifts to the Temple, but making gifts of alms, right? The famous story of the widow's mite, right, the widow who only has that one coin left, she's going into the Temple and she's going to put the coin into the treasury. It was basically like a box, a coin box with a slot. You would throw the coin in and that was your offering or your tithe to support the Temple, to support the priests, to support the ancient Israelite sanctuary and the worship that took place there. Of course, in that case of the widow's mite, she doesn't just give a tenth, she gives everything, she gives one hundred percent, because that is all she possesses. So the practice of tithing, the practice of giving alms, the practice of giving money, making a monetary offering to the Temple, is a very deeply rooted scriptural practice in the Old Testament and in Judaism.

And it's going to continue into the time of the early Church. So one last passage is a very important passage for our custom of having the collection as part of Sunday

Liturgy is from St. Paul. This is probably the most important text. In 1 Corinthians 16, St. Paul not only talks about giving alms in general, he specifically ties the collection of money to the Sunday liturgy, to the Sunday assembly. This is what he says:

*Now concerning the contribution (Greek *logeia*; Latin *collecta*) for the saints...*

The Greek word here for contribution is *logeia*. The Latin is *collecta*. So you could literally translate this, “Now concerning the collection that's being gathered”, right? That is the exact word. That's where we get the terminology of collection from. It's 1 Corinthians 16

*Now concerning the contribution (Greek *logeia*; Latin *collecta*) for the saints as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. (1 Corinthians 16:1-3; cf. 2 Cor 9:7: “God loves a cheerful giver...”)*

What's this talking about? At the time that Paul's writing this letter, the saints, the holy ones, which is just the name for the Christians in Jerusalem, are very poor, right, and they are in grave need. So one of the things Paul is doing is he's going around the churches throughout Asia Minor and Greece and he's gathering money to bring with him back to Jerusalem. He's gathering a collection to go provide for the needs of the Church and especially the needs of the poor in the city of Jerusalem, from those churches in Corinth and other places that are more well off, that are not facing the same kind of persecutions and economic difficulties that the church in Jerusalem is. So he says, I want you each Sunday when you come together—this is a little glimpse of the Sunday Eucharist—to put something aside out of your abundance and gather it up, collect it, so that I can then give it as a gift to the church in Jerusalem. So this is basically the Biblical roots of the bishop's appeal, right? So St. Paul, as an Apostle, is kind of like the first bishop, and he's

gathering a special collection for the poor in Jerusalem. And to this day, there's often a custom of one Sunday will have a collection for the Christians living in Jerusalem, especially at the various holy sites in Jerusalem. And so the idea of like a special collection at Sunday Mass goes right back to the New Testament.

So those are some of the Biblical roots of the collection. It's very clear that this practice is rooted both in Judaism and in early Christianity. In fact, Paul's going to also mention it in 2 Corinthians 9, another letter to Corinth, where he'll famously say, you know, he who sows sparingly, reaps sparingly. So let each person give as he feels moved to give because God loves a cheerful giver. In 2 Corinthians 9, Paul is going to talk about the fact that he doesn't specify an amount. Unlike the Old Testament, where it's explicit that has to be a tithe, Paul is going to encourage Christians to give as they are able, but to always do so with a generous heart, knowing that if you sow sparingly, you're going to reap sparingly, but if you sow abundantly, God's going to bless that gift, right, because God loves a cheerful giver. It's kind of imitation of God himself, because what has God give to us? Well, He not only gives us everything we possess, but in the incarnation, and then of course, the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, Christ is going to offer himself whole and entire on the cross. There's a sacrificial dimension to the offering, to the collection, in Paul's understanding of this ancient Christian practice.

Okay, so those are a few Biblical roots of the Collection. What about its roots in Sacred Tradition? Well, given how clear early and explicitly the collection is tied to sacrifice in the Old Testament, the Temple in the Old Testament, the priesthood and the poor in the Old and the New Testaments, it's no surprise that if you walk through the tradition of the Church, there's going to be lots of evidence for Christians bringing monetary offerings to the Eucharistic liturgy going all the way back to the beginning. So, for example, St. Justin Martyr, who I've mentioned before, who's very important because in his *First Apology* gives us the oldest description of the Roman liturgy that we possess. In his account, he does actually describe a monetary collection as part of the Sunday liturgy. This is what he says:

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.*³

Now, Justin does not tell us exactly when the collection is taken up during the Liturgy. It is unclear. He is a little vague on that point. But what he is very clear on is that Christians are to bring a monetary offering, that they are to do so willingly, that they are to give as each of them chooses and are able — so that is a difference than the tithe that's commanded under the Mosaic prescription in the Old Testament — and that the purpose of this gift is really clear. It is given to the priest, it's given to him who presides, so that the monetary offering is going to be brought to the one who's ministering in the Sanctuary is for orphans, widows, people who are sick, who are in need, the poor, prisoners, immigrants. In other words, anyone who has any kind of need in the Church, right? So that's very directly flowing out of the custom of collecting money for the Church and for the poor in ancient Israel and in Jewish tradition. So much for Justin Martyr.

As you continue through the history of the Church, you're going to see over and over again witnesses to the practice of gathering money, collecting money and giving it to the Church and to the poor. One of the ones that really strikes me is from St. John Chrysostom. St. John Chrysostom was the late 4th century Bishop of Constantinople, one of the greatest writers in the early Church. And one of the things that he did with his congregation was encouraged them not only to give to the poor, but also to have a poor box, a money box in their homes so that they would collect money throughout the week in order to bring for the poor to the Sunday service. And so I found this passage in one of his homilies on repentance and almsgiving. I thought it was very moving and very challenging because he talks about just how important gathering monetary offerings were in the context of the family. Listen to what he says:

“Therefore, ...let us collect money in the home for the explicit purpose of almsgiving. *In this manner, therefore, let everyone's house become a church that will have sacred money stored up within it.* Wherever money is stored

³ Justin Martyr, *I Apology* 65, 67. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 1:67-68; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1351.

up for the poor, that place is inaccessible to demons; and the money that is collected together for almsgiving fortifies Christian homes more than a shield, spear, weapons, physical power, and multitudes of soldiers.⁴

So this is very interesting. What Chrysostom is basically saying is just like we have poor boxes in the Church, where you can give money, you can give alms, he says bring that practice into your home as you prepare for Sunday liturgy. Have a poor box where you're gathering offerings throughout the week so that you turn your home into what John Chrysostom himself will call a domestic church, he'll call it a little church in some of his writings. Augustine says the same thing, that the Christian family becomes a kind of domestic church. So just as there is a time and a place in church and in the liturgy to give money to the Church and to the poor. So too at home, if you have a poor box at home, basically this becomes a kind of powerful spiritual edifice that's even a protection, according to St. John Chrysostom, against demonic influence and the oppression and the attacks of the devil. Many people try to protect their homes with security alarms or weapons, he says actually almsgiving and gathering money for the poor and the destitute, for widows and orphans, this is the strongest spiritual protection you can have in the home when you think of the home as a domestic church. So just a little insight there, it might be a practice we could help cultivate again in contemporary times, of gathering the Collection, not just in the Church — let me grab some money out of my wallet — but even in the home.

I know as a father too, that especially when the kids are little, they love to participate in the offering by giving something of their own. Whatever money they might have, if it's a penny or a nickel or quarter or a dollar, they tie into that very early on, the significance of that self-offering and they want to participate in it. So this might be a practical thing that we could take up again, to have the poor box not just at church but in the domestic church in the home. And John Chrysostom is basically giving this as a way of preparing, too, for the offering that's going to take place at the Sunday liturgy in the Sunday collection. And sure enough, that's the 5th century, but if you fast forward to the 20th century, this is going to be part of the catechesis of the Church to our own day. One of the Five Precepts of the

⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Repentance and Almsgiving*, 10.4.15.

Church in the Catechism, these basic practices that all Catholics are supposed to engage in is tied to giving money to the Church and to the poor. So in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, you have a number of precepts like the obligation for Sunday Mass, you shall attend Mass on all Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation, the obligation to receive the Sacrament of Confession at least once a year, the obligation to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion at least once a year. One of the precepts of the Church, the fifth precept, is this:

The fifth precept (“*You shall help to provide for the needs of the Church*”) means that the faithful are obliged to assist with the material needs of the Church, each according to his own ability. (CCC 2043)

So there you see the precept of the Church that as Catholics we are obliged to make monetary offerings to support the Church, that is rooted in the words of St. Paul himself, that each is called to give according to their means and according to their ability to give. So the idea of monetary offerings in the Mass is something I don't think we understand often the deep spiritual significance of this moment in the Mass. In fact, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is going to emphasize this in its description of the Liturgy in paragraph 1351, when it says:

From the very beginning Christians have brought, along with the bread and wine for the Eucharist, gifts to share with those in need. This custom of the collection, ever appropriate, is inspired by the example of Christ who became poor to make us rich [cf. 1 Cor 16:1; 2 Cor 8:9]. (CCC 1351)

Probably an echo there of the teaching of St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 8:9:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

And you might be thinking, well, when was Jesus rich? I mean, Mary and Joseph weren't rich, right? When was he ever rich? Well, he was rich before his incarnation because as God, everything belonged to him. But he divests Himself of that and becomes poor, so that he might give everything to us, right? To give

Himself obviously in the sacrifice of the Cross, but also to bestow the spiritual riches that he possessed as the eternal Son of God upon the Church, His Bride.

So in imitation of Him, the Church is going to call us during the liturgy, especially as we're preparing to celebrate the sacrifice, where Christ is going to offer all that He is and all that He has to the Father on the Cross. It's fitting that we offer something, make some monetary offering in union with the sacrifice of Christ in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. And at least for me personally, the kind of mystical, spiritual meaning of the Collection has really deepened over the years as I've studied more and more about the theology of almsgiving in the early Church. And I just would like to conclude by a couple of quotes from a book I recently read. This book is called *Charity*. It's by Gary Anderson, who's a professor at the University of Notre Dame, and it's on the theology and place of the poor in the Biblical tradition, and giving to the poor. One of the things we tend to forget, I think, at least in a contemporary Catholic context, is that when we give to the collection in the Sunday liturgy, is that it isn't just for our parish. It isn't just for the diocese. It isn't just for the Church. It is also ordered toward giving to the poor and giving to those who are in need, especially through the services to the poor that any given parish or diocese will engage in. And if you look at the theology of almsgiving in the writings of the Church Fathers, one of the things that is going to be striking and very different than I think the way that we think about making a monetary offering is that several of the Church Fathers will say that when you give to the Church or when you give to the poor, there's a sacrificial dimension to Almsgiving. There's a sacrificial character to the Collection. I'm just going to quote two passages, both of them again from St, John Chrysostom.

St. John Chrysostom has perhaps the most developed theology of giving money, of giving alms, and this is what he says about giving, in particular giving to the poor. He says that when you give to the poor, the poor man, each poor person is like an altar upon which you are offering sacrifice. John Chrysostom in his homily on 2nd Corinthians, which we've been quoting from, says this:

"You honor this altar indeed, because it receives Christ's body [at the Eucharist].

In other words, we venerate the stone altar, right, or the wood, sometimes it is wood or stone in the ancient church. We venerate the altar that the Eucharist is offered on because it receives the body of Christ.

But the poor man, who is himself the body of Christ, you treat with scorn.... You can see this altar lying around everywhere, both in streets and in market places, and you can sacrifice upon it every hour; for on this too is sacrifice performed.”⁵

And then again, he's going to say the same thing elsewhere:

“Whenever then you see a poor believer... imagine that you behold an altar. Whenever you meet a beggar, don't insult him, but reverence him.”⁶

So, in other words, for Chrysostom, because the poor in a particular way are like living icons of Christ, as Jesus will say in the parable of the sheep and the goats: What you did to the least of these, my brethren, you did to me. Right, insofar as the poor are visible signs of Christ's presence in the world, to give to the poor or to make an offering on behalf of the poor is, in a sense, to lay a sacrifice on the altar. So there's a kind of sacrificial liturgical mysticism of almsgiving and collections in the theology of the Church Fathers. Well, if that's true, and if giving to the Church and giving to the poor is a sacrificial act, then what better place should the collection be gathered than during the Offertory? Precisely as the Church is preparing to offer the sacrifice of sacrifices, the sacrifice of the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ on the altar of the Eucharist, it's fitting that the Church would also gather the monetary collection to be offered for the Church and for the poor. So I just would encourage you, as you're thinking about this theology of the Offertory in this moment of Mass, not to let this moment pass you by, because it really is another key part of the Mass that helps us to remember that we don't just come to the Mass to receive, we come to offer, because the Mass isn't just a meal, the Mass is a sacrifice.

⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homily on 2 Corinthians*. Quoted in Gary Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013), 15..

⁶ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, 20. In Anderson, *Charity*, 25.