

A Meditation on the Offertory

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In a traditional church The Offertory is when they collect money. You've all seen it, ushers passing basins from pew to pew and the people passing basins down each pew, or, in churches where they are more suspicious, it is deep cloth pouches on the ends of poles. The ushers shove the pouch down the pew on the end of the pole and you put your money offering in as it goes by. One reason for doing it this way was to make it much more difficult to take anything out – which, apparently, in some early American churches, was a problem with basins. A one would go in and a five would disappear. Along with the announcements, The Offertory seemed to me, when I was a child, to form a sort of relaxed interlude in the middle of the service. One's attention wasn't required to listen to a sermon or find the correct place in the Book of Common Prayer.

A question then for the Education For Ministry people. How was The Offertory done in the early church? Anybody know?

Comment: Was it kind of like a big pot-luck?

Yeah, you'd bring some bread, usually small round loaves, to the worship service and a couple of jugs (amphorae) of the local wine. It's a good thing local wines tended to be uniform, because they mixed it all together upon receipt. Today that would bring startling results, but they managed to get away with it then. There would be somebody at the church door, usually a deacon, to collect the bread and wine, and then a selection would be made from the collected bread and wine to take to the altar to use in the Eucharist. The rest of it was divided into two lots, one for the poor, the other to support the clergy. So in-kind offerings were brought to church and then divided into three parts: one for ceremonial use, one for the poor and one for the clergy. If you look at the liturgies of the earliest church, you discover this applied not only to bread and wine, but to olives, fish, honeycomb, vegetables, just about any in-kind thing you can name. There are blessings for everything. These were, apparently, used frequently, as people would bring their in-kind offerings for the support of the church's work, to be divided three ways: for worship, for the poor and for the clergy.

So that's how The Offertory worked, and it did something I think rather startling. It connected the process of worship to people's daily lives in an immediate kind of way. The bread you made was eaten by the poor; the wine

you pressed was used by the clergy at their communal meals. There is, in fact, in the early liturgies no provision for a money offering at all. The assumption was that offerings would be in kind. Provision for a money offering came only gradually into the church.

Now one of the peculiarities of St. Anselm is that we don't take an offering of money during the service. Besides early church precedent there are a number of pastoral reasons for that. First, we're too small not to know who puts something into the plate and who doesn't. You can't deal with that by changing pews, either. Second, I want to change our understanding of what the offering means. All too often the offering has become a kind of fiscal interlude in the process of worship. Everything stops and the sense is, OK, now we are going to gather what we need to pay the light bill. Now there is more going on than paying the bills, so to focus on meeting the church's financial needs is false emphasis.

In the sequence of our Eucharistic worship God has approached us by means of his Word presented in the lessons, we have said, "Yes, where the Bible begins is where we also will begin." That's the purpose of the creed, to provide a shared beginning point. And, if this is where we are to start, the natural next step is to relate the rest of the world to that beginning point. That's the purpose of the creed, to provide a shared beginning point. And, if this is where we are to start, the natural next step is to relate the rest of the world to that beginning point. That's the purpose of the Prayers of the People. The Prayers of the People are not a piece of spiritual technology which aims at getting all sorts of things to happen which wouldn't happen without them. The purpose is to relate the world and its needs and concerns to that starting point in God which has been given to us.

Since this whole process of listening to God, of accepting God's initiative towards us as our starting point and relating ourselves and the rest of the world to that starting point, is a flawed process, we don't do it right, it's a good thing to have a confession in there which acknowledges the distance remaining between ourselves and God, even in the midst of our responding, of our worshiping him.

Once all that has happened, the next question is, what do we do with ourselves? Or to put it in a more focused way, what do we do with our pasts? Now the offertory is what we do with the past, because the bread and wine, which in the ancient church the worshipers brought from home to the church every Sunday, that's the life of the congregation. What they have been doing during the past week was making the bread, pruning the vines, storing the grain, sowing, milling, checking the gas gage on top of the fermenting tank, because that kind of thing is what you did in an agricultural society. So when you take that loaf of bread and amphora of wine to church what you're taking is your life, what you and the community have been doing during the week. It's clear that that's how the early church understood it, that the bread and wine were symbols of who they were. That's what gets offered is who we are. It's not that bread and wine are a symbol which comes to us from someplace outside our lives; God then doing some neat trick to them at the front of the church, after which we eat them and some kind of magical power accrues to us because they come from some special or holy realm. No, in this community, somehow,

some kind of connection is made possible between our story and God's story, between our lives and God's love. The offering is the opening of our story to God's story, the placing of our past at the disposal of the divine love.

Now, even if the offering is a monetary collection, the symbol still works, although it's a bit more obscure. Money offerings, I think, create a symbol in danger of being hijacked. But in this society there is very little which could be a more adequate symbol of what we value, of how power works, what we believe brings security, what we seek and, for that matter, there is no better symbol of that which needs to be redeemed, than money. So, if the church means what she says about life lived toward God being a life aimed at redemption, then there is something very appropriate about a money offering. Unfortunately, because of our attitude toward money the very appropriateness of the offering also makes it easily misunderstood. It becomes not a means toward holiness, but a means toward power. That's just as true in the church as elsewhere. It's perfectly possible to see a monetary offering as a means to institutional power. I've heard vestries talk that way.

So The Offertory is a beginning answer to the question, "What do we do with our pasts, our stories, our histories, in relation to this beginning point which God gives and our relation of our world to it, which we have experienced earlier in the service?" The answer is that we open our pasts, our stories, our histories for some kind of relationship with God. At this point Christianity asserts something amazing, I have trouble accepting it, and yet, without it's being there, I think Christianity simply crashes, becoming an antiquarian pastime, a bizarre cult, or something like that. Christianity makes the claim that God expresses herself in this world. But most religions claim that. But in Christianity the usual way that expression takes place is immanent, not transcendent, not something coming down from on high which then zaps things which need changing. God does not come as a sort of a heavenly Lone Ranger, riding over the horizon out of the purple sage to save the day and then mysteriously disappearing. That's what I call the theory of a mostly absent but occasionally present deity. I have no use for mostly absent but occasionally present deities. If I'm going to have a god I want one who is committed to the neighborhood, who is around most of the time, thank you. But, it is kind of embarrassing to think about sharing life with a God who is constantly present. So the church is in this constant battle with itself trying to figure out whether we really want a God who is constantly present or one which comes when things need fixing up. Occasional or constant.

The Offertory indicates that the Episcopal Church, at least, opts for the constantly present God. At least when we understand ourselves. If the means of God's presence, the bread and wine of the Eucharist, are first our lives being offered to God, then God is present in the constant movement of our existence, not in an occasional foray into our world.

The Offertory tries to say that the normal means of God's expression in this world is through us. It tries to say that God is, to use the classical language, immanent in human beings, in the natural world, in the whole creation. If we engage in that favorite Oregon Sunday morning pastime, called, "Looking for God in the Woods," we will, in fact, probably find God there. Because God

is there. Now, we may not find the whole story – we may need more than we can find in the natural world. (There is no compassion in either tree trunks or talus fields, but there needs to be in human beings.) But I think it's incredibly unchristian to say that one can't find God in the natural world at all.

The bread, the wine, the symbols of our story, when they move from that table back there to this table up here, that's a process. The procession of the elements is a process of becoming available, becoming available to God. To move from the credence table to the altar is not to become a morally better person, but to become more open to discovering God's presence in the person we are. That's what The Offertory is about, the process of our past becoming available to God. The amazing claim which Christianity makes is that your past is quite capable of expressing God's love in the present. Whoever you are is capable of doing that. Whatever you have been is capable of that. I'm constantly butting heads with the assumption that in order to be adequate to God, to become an instrument of God, we have to change ourselves somehow. The assumption behind this is that we are inadequate to that purpose right now and the object of religion is to make us good little boys and girls so that we become adequate. The mild word I think of to express my opinion of that is flappedoodle. Christianity did not give people the courage to confront the Roman Empire, its secret police, its social policy, its tightly knit and tightly controlled local governments, by saying to them, "If you will only work just a bit harder, you'll become adequate." NO! The early church gave its members courage by telling them that God was working in them, present to them, as they were right then; that whoever they were, they were adequate to God's purposes for them. They did not have to be someone other than who they were. Who they were right then was quite capable of expressing the love of God in this world. And that's really what The Offertory is about. Because it's our stories, our lives, our neurotic tendencies, our regrets for the past, our lost opportunities for good, our ignorances displayed, our cruelties enacted, our fears, the whole mass of them goes from back there to up here (credence table to altar). What happens up here is that Christ comes into our stories, into our past and gives it back to us, but returned to us not simply as our story, but as our story infused with, connected to, intertwined with, Christ's story. In other words, the Eucharist is the constant recreation of a community of sacrifice.

So that's what The Offertory is about and that's why, here at St. Anselm, I emphasize the bread and wine moving from back there to up there. I think that movement emphasizes the symbolic power of what The Offertory is about in the process of worship: the journey of opening up to God, the surrender of that last bastion of egocentricity, our own histories, to be shared with Christ. Which journey, by the way, can be one tough trip. But that's what it's about and it's a lot more than a way of getting together the cash the church needs to make the institution work. It's an integral and central element in the evolution of the spiritual life of a human being. What shall we do with what we have been? There is no true religion without an answer to that question.

OK. Well, I've said more than enough about that.