

Liturgy Lesson Nineteen: Washing of the Hands

Last week we learned about the prayers said over the gifts of bread and wine. Did you ever wonder why the priest washes his hands after he has offered these gifts? The washing originally was connected to the gifts that were brought to the altar. In ancient Jewish celebrations animals were sacrificed and washing hands was essential. In the early years of our Catholic Church the ushers didn't collect envelopes in a basket. The people brought bread, wine, oil, candles, grapes, vegetables, and even animals to the celebration to help support the community and the poor. After receiving all these gifts, in addition to the gifts of bread and wine specifically used for the Eucharist, the washing of the priest's hands was essential.

Gradually, as the “gifts” brought by the faithful changed from usable goods and food to money, the washing became symbolic, almost a reminder to the priest that he is imperfect and sinful, just like the people he represents. As he washes his hands the priest quietly prays a verse of the 51st Psalm: “Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sin.”

Note that the words “iniquity” and “sin” are singular, not plural. That tells us that we are all part of the sin of the world. While our individual sins are important, it is also important to periodically be cleansed of contributing to the sinfulness that infects the people of God and our world. The priest is our representative. As we watch him wash his hands, perhaps we should also pray silently, “Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sin.”