

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 16: How Much Does it Cost?

As the ushers came around with the collection basket one Sunday, a small boy leaned over to his father and said, "You don't have to pay for me, Dad. I'm under five." Another youngster, listening to her mother complaining about the quality of the music and the preaching as they left Mass, said, "You have to admit, Mom. It wasn't a bad show for a nickel!"

Both children share the same misconception about the meaning of the collection at Mass. They see it as the price of admission, but there is no admission required here. How might we explain to them what the collection really means?

The official books tell us very little. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal, as it describes the procession with the gifts, simply says: "It is well also that money or other gifts for the poor or for the Church, brought by the faithful or collected in the church, should be received" (# 73).

Most pastors and parish finance councils, on the other hand, see the collection as absolutely essential to keeping the parish going. Its practical value is obvious. It takes a lot of money to maintain buildings and programs and to keep the light and heat and air conditioning going.

The role of the collection during Mass, however, goes beyond the practical goal of meeting the annual budget. Remember that the collection takes place during the Preparation of the Gifts, and the money we give is carried forward as part of the procession with the bread and wine. The point of the collection, then, has something to do with preparing ourselves to enter into the sacrifice of Christ.

In our culture, money is a powerful symbol of ourselves. The process of getting it and spending it tends to dominate our lives. So when we give some of it back to God, we express our willingness to give ourselves to God.

It is not just a matter of giving God one or two percent of our income or even of tithing ten percent to God. In biblical times, the Jews made an offering of the first fruits of the harvest. It was a sign of gratitude for the harvest but also a symbol that the whole harvest really belonged to God. What we give in the collection should be a symbol of all that we have. It is a reminder that everything we own is a gift from God. Our gift in the collection is both a sign of our gratitude and a symbol that we will use all of God's gifts as God wills.

Notice, too, that the General Instruction speaks of gifts for the poor or for the Church. We need to remember that our gifts must do more than ensure our own comfort and our own programs in the parish. At least part of what we give must go to the poor if we are really to imitate our Lord. In this way, too, what we put in the collection prepares us to share in Christ's sacrifice, for it expresses our willingness to care for those in need and to give ourselves to others in love as he did.