



We continue our journey through the Offertory of the Mass. After the gifts are brought forward (and after the incense, when it is used), you may notice that the **priest washes his hands** over a dish called a *lavabo* (meaning, “I shall wash”) and dries them with a towel. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* says that this washing is a rite “in which the desire for interior purification finds expression” (GIRM, 76).

Practical and Symbolic Significance of Handwashing

To explain this handwashing in more depth, Charles Belmonte teaches, “In every Mass, a liturgical act is performed which originally was a response to a practical necessity. The celebrant *washes his hands*, which have touched the sundry offerings as well as the censer, before taking up the bread about to become the body of Christ. The Church has kept this ceremony of the *Lavabo* to express the desire of interior purification. This mystical meaning was emphasized by St. Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century, when he wrote: ‘This action shows that we must be free from all sin. We perform actions with our hands; to wash our hands is the nearest thing to purifying our deeds’” (*Understanding the Mass*, p. 114).

Even if the spiritual meaning makes sense, you may note the practical reality that the priest’s hands don’t look dirty. It is true that our offerings today are clean, but if you remember a few installments back, in the early days of the Church people would bring all kinds of things for the offertory, not just neat little containers of bread and wine. For example, someone might bring produce or chickens as gifts for the poor. Naturally, if the priest was handling these kinds of offerings, we would want him to wash his hands before continuing the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

While we no longer need the practical cleaning today, the understanding of spiritual cleansing is very valuable. As the Diocese of Peoria notes, “the Church maintains this washing ritual as it expresses an inward desire to be cleansed within” (*A Study of the Mass*, p. 12). This desire is very clear when we see the private prayer the priest prays at this washing: “Wash me, O Lord, from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.” Although the priest prays this prayer privately, this is another place where all the faithful could unite in prayer, asking God to purify our minds and hearts in anticipation of being in the True Presence of Christ himself on the altar.

Uniting Ourselves to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass

After washing his hands, the priest goes back to the center of the altar, extends his hands and then rejoins them, and asks the faithful: “Pray, brethren (brothers and sisters), that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.” According to our most recent directives, the faithful stand to make the response: “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his name, for our good and the good of all his holy Church.” Charles Belmonte writes that “the priest begs us to unite ourselves with him in the sacrificial act as it draws nearer... the priest stresses that the sacrifice is *mine* (i.e., Christ offers himself—the aspect of ministerial priesthood) *and yours* (the entire Church offers the sacrifice—the aspect of common priesthood)” (*Understanding the Mass*, p. 115). The Diocese of Peoria explains, “The invitation makes a distinction between the way in which the priest makes his offering and the way in which the faithful make theirs. The Sacrifice of the Mass is not offered by the priest alone. All of us by virtue of our baptism are called upon to offer ourselves to the Father through Christ” (*A Study of the Mass*, p. 12).

As we have seen throughout the Offertory, there are several opportunities to unite ourselves and our sacrifices to Jesus. This is no accident! Each of these invitations helps us to be aware of what we can offer and to be attentive to what is about to happen in the Mass. Next time, we’ll see the Prayer over the Offerings draw our prayers and sacrifices together as the time of Christ’s True Presence draws ever closer.