

Passing the Offering Plate and the Importance of Ceremony

We have made several accommodations to our worship practices during the past year—either to offer distance or eliminate “cross-touching”. Some of these accommodations you might prefer. Others you might wish we reverse and go back. Whatever the case, anytime we make adjustments to our rites, rituals, and ceremonies in the worship service, it offers us a chance to reflect on what was lost or even gained.

One of those adjustments was not passing the offering plate. Instead, it was placed on a table in the back of the sanctuary. Parishioners have been able to drop their offering in coming or going. Perhaps some time was saved. Maybe even people felt less self-conscious if they didn’t have an offering to give. The fact is, too, our giving last year surpassed giving totals from the previous two years. It has become a *new* custom, and few, if any of you have missed the practice of passing the plate. *But what was lost?* And why did we even pass the plate in the first place? **The man function of ritual or ceremony in the Divine Service is to teach us something**—either about God (what He gives) or about us (how we respond to His gifts).¹ So, the question we should ask is, “What does the passing of the plate and the bringing forward of the offering during the service teach us?”

The practice of collecting and bringing forward the gifts of the congregation is ancient. It goes back at least to the 4th century, when church buildings were built and people congregated *outside* of their homes for worship.² With bigger spaces, movement during worship increased. Soon, there was a processional character that developed during the liturgy. The offering would take place between what we call the Service of the Word³ and the Service of the Sacrament. It was complex because from the crowd of worshippers, everyone brought gifts to be “collected”. These gifts were gathered from different stations (using something like our “ushers”) and brought to the altar. During this collection, the choir would sing an *offertorium* to cover the time needed for the ceremony. Most of the gifts were loaves of bread and flasks of wine. It was from this offering that the elements needed for the Eucharist was taken. This practice continued well into the Middle Ages. Instead of bread and wine, monetary gifts, jewels, and other contributions were collected for use in the Church. In the Lutheran reformation, this ceremony was kept.

What was taught in this ritual? It was of a practical nature, a gathering of what was needed for distribution of the poor, for the use of the clergy, and even for the use in the Sacrament of the Altar. But the collection taught that *all gifts were welcome and needed*. No one’s gift was singled

¹ This is the main argument made in *The Augsburg Confession* Article XXIV for keeping ceremonies in the Church, **that the people might be taught**.

² For the first three centuries, Christians primarily met in homes for necessity. It wasn’t until 313 AD that Christianity was legally recognized in the Roman Empire. With this, and the Emperor’s conversion, churches began to be built.

³ Starting in the 5th century, this would include procession into the church, the Introit, Kyrie, Gloria, singing of psalms, the reading of the epistle and gospel, and the sermon.

out or extolled.⁴ Everyone was equal in their giving—for instead of coming up one by one, the gifts were collected, gathered, brought forward *at the same time*, to be used for the needs of the Church. The offering also served as a valuable liturgical bridge between God’s gift of His Word and His body and blood.

But there was something else that is implicitly communicated in the act of gathering the offering and bringing it forward. It is the faithful response by the congregation to all the gifts the Lord gives His people. **Everything we have comes from God.** The collection is a gathering of God’s abundant, lavish material gifts, and a *re-presentation* of this gift back to the Lord in a ceremonial and meaningful way. It’s as if the congregation says to God, “We know this is all Yours. And in gratitude and thanksgiving, we offer back to You a portion...so that Your Church is fed and supported and that we might rejoice in this work.” We might call it *returning thanks*.

Starting this month, we will again practice the ceremony of collecting the offering and processing it to the altar. Could we just leave the plates on the back table? Sure. There’s no “sin” in it. And there’s very little we do in the liturgy that is “commanded” in the Bible. Our rites and ceremonies are *adiaphora*.⁵ But we would lose a wonderful opportunity to join ourselves to the early Church in corporate and congregational praise by bringing our offerings back to God—for He is the Author of all and our good and gracious heavenly Father. Most importantly, we would lose a wonderful opportunity to be taught in this ceremony how God blesses us all and what it is to be a congregation in the name of the Lord.

⁴ It was the case early on that the aristocracy gave their gifts directly to the bishop.

⁵ Latin term which means “neither forbidden nor commanded”.