

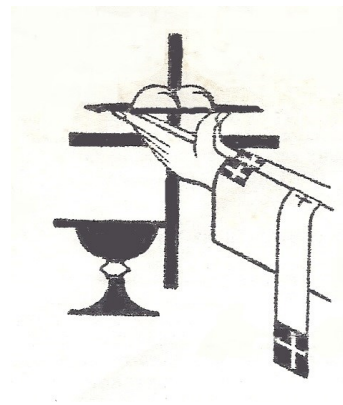
God. For in a sense when we offer our gifts at the Altar, we are actually offering ourselves. Our money is a part of ourselves, what we have earned, what we have labored for. And thus the offering of our possessions becomes the offering of our very beings. But if we think of our offering in the Service as a sacrifice of ourselves, then we will also want to carry out this sacrifice in our daily lives—otherwise the offering of our possessions would be only hypocrisy.

Furthermore, when we offer at the Altar, we are offering in union with our Lord Jesus Christ—offering our imperfect sacrifices in union with the perfect Sacrifice of His Body and Blood, which He offered to His heavenly Father. For it is only because of His perfect Sacrifice that our sacrifices are of any value.

The Offertory Our Firstfruits

Finally, our offering is to be the firstfruits of our labor—not what happens to be left over after all of our bills and debts have been paid. But our offering at the Altar ought to be a sacrifice of the first and the best we can give.

If we Christians would consider our offerings in this way—as a fulfillment of our Royal Priesthood, a privilege, and a sacrifice of our firstfruits, then we would more readily offer ourselves, our bodies, and souls and all things as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.



The Offertory

If one were to ask the average Lutheran, “What does the Offertory mean to you?,” he would undoubtedly have to stop and think for quite some time before he could give an answer—if he even knew what the Offertory was. It is sad but true that the part of the Service which we call the Offertory means very little to the average Lutheran. He might think of it as the place where we take “the collection” or he may misunderstand the Offertory verse as a “response to the sermon,” but few Lutherans truly appreciate what the Offertory is.

The Offertory in the Early Church

In the early centuries of the Church, the Offertory was one of the most vital and meaningful parts of the Service. Before the Offertory, all those who were not baptized members in good standing were asked to leave. For it was considered highly improper for a non-Christian to be allowed to make an offering at the Altar of God. To offer one’s possessions to the Almighty was considered a sacred privilege—a privilege which could be taken away from a member under discipline.

Since in the Early Church, money was not a common medium of exchange, Christians would ordinarily bring food and drink as their offering. Then as much bread and wine as was needed for the Sacrament was set aside and offered as an oblation to God. The remainder of the food was given to the poor.

The Offertory and the Royal Priesthood

The Offertory is that place in the Service where we as a Christian parish carry out in a very concrete way our Royal Priesthood. As we know from the Holy Scriptures, the first and foremost task of a “priesthood” is to offer sacrifice.

In the Old Testament, it was a specially chosen priesthood which was given the privilege of offering sacrifices in the temple, but in the New Testament, St. Peter tells us that all Christians are members of the “priesthood.” All Christians now have the supreme privilege of offering sacrifices at the Altar of God. And it is at the Offertory that we, the Royal Priesthood, are given the privilege and opportunity to offer these sacrifices and to fulfill our priesthood.

The Offertory as a Privilege

That is what the Offertory is—a privilege. And this is how we ought to think of our offering—that God grants us sacred permission to dare to offer a gift to our Creator. Unfortunately, too many of us think of the offering not as a privilege but as an obligation which we must fulfill if we are to be pleasing to God—even if secretly we would rather not. This is a thorough misunderstanding of the Offertory.

The Offertory as a Sacrifice of Self

It is at the Offertory where Christians offer sacrifice to