

The Death of the Tray

To have a tray or not to have a tray, that is the question. Of course, the tray in question is the "offering tray" that is passed at the conclusion of the service. The tradition of making an offering is historically connected as an act of worship; this connection needs restoration in our day.

Our ancestors did a remarkable thing every time they gathered for worship ... they brought offerings to be given to those in need. Whatever they had, bread, wine, chickens or eggs, it was brought to be given to the needy and poor, who were being provided for by the Church through the deacons. The notion of coming to church without an offering would have been tantamount to saying, 'I have no reason to go at all.' The reason is because whatever they brought was a way of expressing their offering of themselves to Christ.

When the early Christians gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper, the attitude was first and foremost one of offering and making a sacrifice of praise. We have forgotten that the Liturgy is a sacrifice of praise and only incidentally as a source of personal edification (Fr. Emilianos). We come to Church, critiquing the choir, the priest's voice and the sermon only to allow our eyes to wander and focus on the clothing of others. All of this is indicative of an attitude of *being served* as opposed to offering oneself.

Spiritual edification is achieved through making an offering of one self to Christ. If the hour and a half on Sunday mornings is the only time spent contemplating God and the remaining 165.5 hours of the past week have been spent thinking about other things - is there any wonder why one comes thirsty and leaves dissatisfied? If we properly prepare ourselves prior to arriving, distractions are minimized and our focus becomes Christ and making a sacrifice of praise to Him.

We come to Church to love and be loved. There can be no liturgy without love. Love for God and the neighbor whom Christ defines as the least of all people are a *pre-condition* for worship. The kiss of peace that is exchanged during the liturgy is not an opportunity to greet one another but to practice love. Prior to coming Sunday mornings and offering our life to Christ, we must first be reconciled with one another, even our enemies. The kiss of peace is a reminder that we cannot receive God's love without first practicing love for one another.

Likewise, the tray that is passed is not there to take our payment for the Sunday service, or to pay bills but as a link of love. Fr. Schmemmann wrote: "For so obvious was the inner link between the Eucharist and the "sacrifice of love," the inner dependency of one on the other in the consciousness of the Church, that the preparation of the gifts, on ceasing to be an expression of practical needs, remained as a rite, expressing this inner dependency, realizing this inner link." In other words, the tray remains but has lost the connection with the offering of oneself in loving service to Christ and one another.

The bread that is prepared for the liturgy is called the "offering bread" or Prosforo. It is the remnant of making the offering of oneself to Christ. Families can use this ancient rite as a way of teaching children that we come to church on Sundays to offer our life to Christ, to make a sacrifice of praise to God and to thank Him for all that He has provided for us in our lives. Fr. Schmemmann says it this way. "For we know that food is life and the whole world has been created as food for man. We also know that to offer this food, this world, this life to God is the initial "eucharistic" function of man...This offering to God of bread and wine, of the food that we must eat in order to live, is our offering to Him of ourselves, of our life and of the whole world."

I pray we may change our attitude towards the Sunday tray and see it is an opportunity to commit oneself to Christ. Certainly, by being a Steward of the church and making that offering in the tray is quite appropriate. Also, giving above and beyond our Stewardship is appropriate as well. Does the tray need to be passed or should it simply be in a place at the back of the church – churches have done both. In either case – the tray will always be an opportunity to remind the faithful why they have come to church on any given Sunday. May we learn from our Tradition, be inspired by it and renew our own convictions about Christ and offering ourselves entirely to Him.

In Christ's Love,
+ Fr. Andrew