

Notes from the Liturgist...

Fractio Panis - The Breaking of the Bread

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The *fractio panis* (Breaking of the Bread) is an important rite within Holy Mass and has taken on great significance over the centuries, indeed this activity has been carefully regulated through the development of the Sacred Liturgy which led towards the end of the seventh century to the introduction of a special chant, the *Agnus Dei*, which is now an important element of the sacred synaxis.

The current General Instruction of the Roman Missal states: “The Priest breaks the Eucharistic Bread, with the assistance, if the case requires, of the Deacon or a concelebrant. The gesture of breaking bread done by Christ at the Last Supper, which in apostolic times gave the entire Eucharistic Action its name, signifies that the many faithful are made one body (1 Cor 10:17) by receiving Communion from the one Bread of Life, which is Christ, who for the salvation of the world died and rose again. The fraction or breaking of bread is begun after the sign of peace and is carried out with proper reverence and should not be unnecessarily prolonged or accorded exaggerated importance. This rite is reserved to the Priest and the Deacon.

The Priest breaks the Bread and puts a piece of the host into the chalice to signify the unity of the Body and Blood of the Lord in the work of salvation, namely, of the Body of Jesus Christ, living and glorious. The supplication *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God) is usually sung by the choir or cantor with the congregation replying; or at least recited aloud. This invocation accompanies the fraction of the bread and, for this reason, may be repeated as many times as necessary until the rite has been completed. The final time it concludes with the words grant us peace.” [83-84]

The *fractio* is immediately followed by the commingling: a particle separated from one of the halves of the fractioned host is dropped into the chalice with an accompanying prayer that had been used in a similar dating back to the papal masses of the eighth century. Thus, in the present-day liturgy the ceremony of the commingling, just before the Communion, is a survival from the ancient Papal liturgies of the Roman Rite.

Only the priest and deacon may carry out the *fractio*. It should also be noted that it must be done at the appropriate part of Holy Mass. “In some places there has existed an abuse by which the Priest breaks the host at the time of the consecration in the Holy Mass. This abuse is contrary to the tradition of the Church. It is reprobated and is to be corrected with haste.” [Redemptionis Sacramentum 55]