

The Amen Corner: Swaddling for the People of God

Paul Turner

Scrupulosity afflicts many a liturgist, researcher and churchgoer. As a presider at mass, I find myself easily distracted about insignificant matters such as where the server sets the missal, vessels and purificators on the altar. I catch myself adjusting the arrangement by inches.

Ritual is repetitious. It thrills by gently modifying the predictable. One hazard is fixating on parts that stay the same. Still, if the altar is properly arranged, it eliminates distractions for prayer. Yet too often liturgists - and even non-liturgists - are more punctilious than prayerful.

One of my obsessions, I confess, is the corporal. I care about how it is made, how it is folded, when it appears, how it is carried, where it is placed, how it is opened, when it is removed, who removes it, where it goes afterward, how many uses it gets, who cleans it, how it is cleaned, the occasions for its use, and most of all - I know you think all of this is silly, but - most of all I obsess over when the vessels first touch it.

The corporal is a square white piece of cloth that customarily measures just over a foot in each direction. It rests on top of the altar cloth and delineates the area where the vessels are placed during the liturgy of the eucharist.

Traditionally the corporal is folded in a particular way: The person who irons it folds the bottom third up and the top third down, then the left third in and the right third to cover. Some corporals have a red cross stitched plop into the middle. It stares back at you if you fold the cloth right.

The corporal is required for every celebration of a Catholic mass, even when mass is taking place outside a church in a nursing home, prison, or private residence. Most Catholics may not even realize that it's there. Eastern Rite Christians use a larger one that folds up and covers the vessels as well. Other Christians have probably never even heard of one. Who notices a small cloth resting on top of another cloth covering the entire altar? And what's the big deal?

Cloth is one of the oldest items associated with the celebration of the eucharist. In the late fourth century, Optatus, the bishop of the north African city Milevis, in a longer work confronting the teachings of the Donatist bishop of Carthage, asked, "Who among the faithful does not know that the wood [of the altar] is covered with a cloth (*linteamine*)?" (CSEL 26:145). The number of altar cloths multiplied by the middle ages, and the corporal eventually got its own status as the uppermost one upon which the sacred vessels were placed.

In the preconciliar mass, immediately after showing the consecrated host to the people, while the sound of bells echoed in the church, the priest actually set the host directly onto the corporal, not onto the paten, genuflected, and then continued with the consecration of the cup. This action, more than any other,

fostered a great mystique around the corporal. It was not simply the cloth upon which the vessels rested, but the cloth upon which the sacramental body of Christ was laid.

This led to the practice of making it and other cloths out of linen. However, the postconciliar General Instruction of the Roman Missal eliminated the requirement concerning the kind of fabric. But the third edition of the missal added a statement that the water used for the washing of “linens” is poured down the sacrarium (334). That is the only appearance of the word “linens” in the missal, and its Latin form, *linteraminum*, salutes Optatus.

Linen is the traditional cloth for allegorical reasons. The synoptic gospels all agree that after Jesus died on the cross, Joseph of Arimathea wrapped his dead body in a linen cloth (Mark 15:46, Matthew 27:59, and Luke 23:53.) John wrote that Jesus was wrapped in more than one cloth, and the fourth gospel did not specify the kind of fabric. Still, linen, and in particular Matthew’s testimony that it was “clean white linen,” surely had an effect on the liturgical decision that the corporal upon which the consecrated body of Christ would be placed, should match the material of biblical testimony.

Unwelcome superstitions grew up around the corporal. Even the gimlet-eyed, turn of the twentieth-century rubrical commentary of Innocent Wapelhorst distanced itself from a rule observed by the Cluniac followers of St. Benedict: “The corporal should always be kept on the left side of the main altar, enclosed in a box, so that it may be at hand in case of fire.” Wapelhorst helpfully explains to the bewildered, “The corporal was thrown into a fire to extinguish its flames. Ecclesiastical authorities later condemned this practice.” As would any local fire brigade.

The corporal unintentionally contributed to an overly physicalized eucharistic piety. The Catholic Church draws a distinction between the physical body of the historical Jesus of Nazareth and the sacramental body of Christ in the eucharist. Liturgical terminology, for example, avoids a reference to “Jesus” without his title “Christ.” The proclamation accompanying the distribution of communion states it neatly. The minister does not announce, “The body of Jesus,” but “The body of Christ.” Before communion the priest says, “Behold the Lamb of God,” not “Behold Jesus,” in order to avoid any miscommunication concerning the real presence of Christ in the eucharist.

However, nothing is sacred. Especially in preconciliar days some Catholic catechists were overly concerned with the presumed physical presence of the historical Jesus. They instructed children not to chew the host lest they hurt Christ. Furthermore, one still hears spurious stories and sees questionable photographs of hosts that, once broken or chewed, leaked red blood. These supposedly documented events intended to change doubters into believers in the real presence of Christ. Needless to say - no, needful to say: that is not mainstream Catholic eucharistic theology.

Not all of this can be blamed on the corporal, of course, but the allegorical piety around the burial-shroud-as-sacrificial-linen may have fomented confusion

between the historical sacrifice on Calvary and its sacramental celebration in the eucharistic sacrifice of the mass.

Fascination with the corporal, then, has been no passing fad.

The Second Vatican Council's revised Order of Mass changed this. Most significantly, the priest, after showing the host to the people, was instructed to place it on the paten, not on the corporal. Most people did not notice. They could little tell what the priest had been doing up there anyway. However, this effectively removed the allegorical comparison between the corporal and the burial cloth of Jesus.

By having the priest place the host on the paten instead of the corporal, the Council did not lose the connection between these sacrifices. Far from it. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy states, "At the Last Supper, Our Savior instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of his Body and Blood, by which the Sacrifice of his Cross is perpetuated until he comes again; and till then he entrusts the memorial of his Death and Resurrection to his beloved spouse, the Church" (47). The council strengthened a third notion of sacrifice: All those at the eucharist are also offering themselves. Eucharistic Prayer I asks God to "accept this oblation of our service." Eucharistic Prayer III says, "make of us an eternal offering to you." The second Eucharistic Prayer for Masses of Reconciliation says, "accept us also, together with your Son." The corporal has become the nexus where these three sacrifices intersect: Calvary, sacrament and community. But in practice, this is often obscured because people either give too little attention to the corporal or too much.

For example, in some Catholic churches, the corporal rests on top of the altar 24/7. No one removes it. And no one complains. Maybe no one notices. It does not belong there. It is among the items on the credence table before mass begins (GIRM 118c). The corporal's function is clearly connected to the liturgy of the eucharist, and its absence from the altar for the first part of mass actually throws emphasis onto the ambo for the liturgy of the word. But out of convenience or ignorance, the corporal in some churches cannot be distinguished from the merely decorative altar cloth on which it rests.

After communion the deacon or the priest is supposed to check the corporal for any fragments, just as he is to cleanse the vessels (GIRM 51). If the breaking of bread has been tidily executed with a quick pair of snaps, the search for fragments along the corporal's swales should be conveniently nonproductive. However, in those churches where bread is broken into dozens or hundreds of pieces, they better signify the mystery of unity from the many who share the one loaf. They also create crumbs. Out of respect for the eucharist and the pastoral care of the pious, a cleric probes the corporal. These practices lend themselves to scrupulosity, but they are meant to show respect for the Catholic belief in the real presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine. However, sometimes an over-eager server carries the corporal away from the altar before the priest or deacon has the opportunity for a final check.

If a corporal is used more than once, there is always some remote possibility that crumbs remain in its folds. If the minister who carries the corporal from the credence table to the altar shakes it open before setting it down, this goes counter to its purpose. Similarly, some people open up the corporal and flip it over, creases up instead of down. It looks prettier that way. But that also defeats its function. Some people pay too little attention to the corporal.

At other times, people overuse it. Surprising to many Catholic practitioners of the liturgy, there is no mention of the corporal outside the rubrics for mass. The only exception is for the communion rite on Good Friday. Otherwise, it is not used for eucharistic adoration or for communion services outside of mass. Planning to set a monstrance on the altar? Keep the corporal in the sacristy. Even the revised Order of Celebrating Matrimony, newly available in English, which permits but does not require the distribution of communion at a wedding without mass, never instructs the priest or deacon to open a corporal on the altar. Unless he is in Mexico. The Spanish translation of the same edition of the same book put the corporal in, perhaps thinking its absence was oversight. However, this cloth relates to the breaking of bread and the offering of sacrifice, not to adoration or to the sharing of communion outside of mass.

Some priests still use a burse, the cloth envelope secure on one side and fanning out toward the other, that housed the corporal prior to the conciliar reforms. Before mass, the corporal was stored inside the burse, which rested on top of the chalice veil, the pall, the paten with its host, the purificator, and the chalice. Often the burse also served as the storage ledge for the tabernacle key - an item closer in proximity than any non-priest participants would ever get to a host consecrated at the mass they attend. After mass, the vessels and cloths were reassembled, the priest, of course, having consumed the host, and the corporal reentered the confines of the burse, its jaunty business end yawning at the celebration's conclusion.

The burse was removed from the rubrics nearly fifty years ago, but some priests still use it, including some who think that they are scrupulously observing all that the GIRM demands.

I know, I know, I know. I should not obsess over these little matters. We have far bigger issues - poverty, racial prejudice, poor education, malnutrition, women's wages, immigration, refugees, domestic violence. I am well aware of these problems. I see them all when I look at my congregation from the other side of the corporal. The eucharist is about them, not a piece of cloth.

But indulge me, please. After all, a musician obsesses over the length of an eighth-note rest. A seamstress obsesses over the finish of the stitch. A chef stands aghast when a patron asks for the salt shaker. Inattention to detail creates its own problems.

Which brings me to the one thing that bothers me most about the corporal: when the vessels first touch it. At a typical mass during the preparation of the gifts, the priest sets the vessels holding the bread and wine onto the corporal, picks up the paten with the bread, says the prayer, sets it down right where it

was, picks up the chalice filled with wine, says the prayer, and sets it back down again. That's it.

Drives me crazy.

The rubric says that the priest holds the paten slightly raised above the altar, says the prayer, and “then” - yes, then - not before - THEN - sets the paten on the altar (GIRM 141). It should not touch the corporal until after the prayer. The same applies to the chalice (GIRM 142). You can find the word “then” there too.

When the vessels first come to the altar, they belong on the side, not on the corporal. They do not go onto the corporal until the priest has praised God for them. Back up a moment. When I go to the edge of the sanctuary to receive the gifts, I choreograph it this way: I grab the money first. I give it to a server. I receive the wine. I hand it to the deacon or another server. Finally I take the bread, so that I can go to the altar with the paten in my hands and, without ever touching anything else, I praise God for the bread of the people, and then, yes, then, I set it on the corporal. If there are multiple chalices and patens, more than can fit on one corporal, there should be several, or one of sufficient size that it can hold all the vessels, the offerings of the people of God.

That word, “then”, encapsulates much of the liturgical vision of the Second Vatican Council. The bread and wine represent the offerings of the lives of the people, the third of the usages of that word “sacrifice.” Catholics believe that Jesus left his followers the eucharistic sacrifice so that they might still participate in the sacrifice of his cross. The people sacrifice too. They come filled with worries, concerns, hopes, dreams and joys. They sacrifice them all.

Lumen gentium, the Councils Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, says that Christ gives the laity “a sharing in His priestly function of offering spiritual worship for the glory of God and the salvation of [humans].... [All] their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become ‘spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.’ Together with the offering of the Lord's body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist.”

The bread and wine symbolize that sacrifice. As the procession moves up to the altar, it passes through the midst of a people who are suffering for those they love, aching to make the world better for folks they do not even know, mindful that some friends think that their presence here is a delusional waste of time. But they are here, offering themselves with a body to be broken and blood to be poured.

The priest holds the sacrifice of the people in his hands. He praises God in a prayer inspired by Jewish *Berakah*. Then. Then he places the gifts of the people onto the corporal. Not until he respects them. Not until he praises God for them. Only then does he set them down on a spot that people used to regard as the allegorical burial cloth of Christ.

The corporal is not the shroud of the dead Jesus. It is the swaddling of the still-breathing people of God, a people of faith, striving to please God with the actions of their lives. They need someone to praise God for their effort, and then - then - to help them put all of that, all of themselves, onto one small square bit of cloth.

Maybe I obsess over this. OK. Obsession for the sake of itself would be stifling. But how can I be too careful with the sacrificial offering of a priestly people?

Worship 90 (September 2016):388-395.