**Liturgy Matters Lesson #19**

**Preparation of the Altar**

**By Bishop Chad Zielinski**

I am Bishop Chad Zielinski serving the Diocese of New Ulm. Thank you for joining me and asking the Holy Spirit to guide us as we continue our lessons on “What Happens at Mass.”

After the procession of the gifts, the altar is prepared, and the bread and wine are placed on it. The priest comes to the altar, picks up the bread, and says a short prayer. In this action, we see Christ begin his action of leading our prayer. Into his hands we have placed our gifts; from his hands, they will be offered to the Father. Before the wine is offered, we see the deacon or priest pouring wine into the chalice and then mixing a little water into the wine as he does so. The words he says inaudibly call this action a mystery. He says, "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity ."Of the two elements, wine, and water, wine is the more precious, and so let it represent divinity. The water placed in the wine represents our poor humanity, which will be completely joined to Christ's divinity in the course of what follows. As early as the middle of the third century Saint Cyprian of Carthage was talking this way. He said that we should never offer the wine without water since that would be like offering Christ without his people.

The transformation of both the bread and the wine are anticipated, and we feel the pull of what is about to happen. “It will become for us the bread of life. It will become our spiritual drink.” The relation between the gifts that the people bring and their very bodies and lives is manifested with special clarity in the liturgy when incense is used at this point. First, the gifts themselves are incensed, which is a ritual gesture marking them out as holy. Then the altar is marked out as holy. The table on which the gifts lie is designated as the holy place that is truly the center of the world: the place for Christ's Paschal Sacrifice. Then the incensing action shifts to honor the bishop as the head of the body, after which the whole body, the assembly, is incensed to indicate that they themselves are what lies on the altar. The whole church becomes a sweet-smelling offering rising up to the Father; the whole church becomes a mysterious and holy place precisely because of what is about to happen.

Thank you for joining me today in this lesson on the Preparation of the Altar. I look forward to sharing Lesson #20 with you next week as we continue our lessons on the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Let us keep one another in prayer. May God bless you and your families.