

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE MINISTRY OF MERCY

In accordance with Lord's Day 38 of the Catechism, which mentions as the fourth purpose of diligently attending the church of God, "to give Christian alms," we call this part of the liturgy the "ministry of mercy." There are, however, other, biblical names. Hebrews 13:16 calls them *sacrifices*. Romans 15:17 of "*ministering*" (in Greek: liturgy). 2 Corinthians 9:12 has yet another expression: the administration of service, *diakonia*. These words make clear that the "offering" is first of all a sacrifice of gratitude to God. We give back to Him from what He first gave us. The texts quoted clearly state that this is pleasing to Him. They also tell us that in this ministry we serve, because we love, the neighbour: *diakonia*.

Of the many questions that arise in relation to this part of the liturgy we mention some.

The *manner* of collecting our sacrifices. Bags or open plates? There are pros and cons for both. Simply to quote that "your left hand may not know what your right hand does," does not solve everything. Early Christians laid their gifts at the feet of the apostles: everyone could see them. Then, because our heart is more deceitful than anything: the one who gives little may prefer a bag (as though God's eyes cannot penetrate a bag!); the one who gives much might prefer an open plate, in order to be seen by man; the Bible calls them Pharisees. In the final analysis it does not matter what we use, if only deep inside we are conscious of the fact that the Lord expects a sacrifice! For the widow it was one small coin, for the rich \$100 might even be too little.

One thing should be stressed: the collecting should not be done in such a manner that it takes much time. More bags or plates, and/or some brethren helping the deacons, so that in a couple of minutes the matter is completed.

For what? The Catechism speaks only of "giving Christian alms," i.e., of providing the deacons with sufficient means to fulfill their mandate satisfactorily. The apostle Paul spent much of his time on such collecting on an international basis, 1 Corinthians 16:1, 2, etc. That seems to exclude second, even third collections, for mission, even for debt-redemption and other specific causes. The ideal is that the church budget include all these needs, for mission, evangelism, Bible translation and distribution. Each member drops his share in an envelope into the box.

At the same time the world has become a village. The crying needs from under-developed countries crying in our ears may not be forgotten. We must do well to all men; also this is, according to Scripture, pleasing to God. It should please us too. The conclusion, then, is that our sacri-

fices are of such a measure, that deacons (in whatever way this may be organized) have sufficient means to feed the hungry, alleviate the many wounds, and save the lives of those starving to death.

More than just collecting? In many churches the offertory is introduced by a Scripture quotation, and concluded with a prayer of dedication. It cannot be denied that such a "frame" around the offertory drives home the awareness that a dime or quarter will not do as a "sacrifice" that we dedicate, present, to our God. We would not dare. (N.B. We are not criticizing large families who attend church with six to nine members, and thus must provide each child with "something for the collection.")

Talking about the family, there is great educational value in the custom that on Sunday mornings Father tells his children what the offertory is for, and that the money they get for the offertory is a reasonable share of Dad's income. Equally, the children may know what voluntary contributions are put aside for the "maintenance of the ministry" (Lord's Day 38 again; it is called "first" and should therefore not be identified with what is mentioned last, "Christian alms"). Children should thus be taught about the firstfruits which belong to God.

Coming back to that "frame" around the offertory: although we recognize the value, we do not deem it necessary to multiply our prayers. This also may become a custom which in a short time is hardly heard any longer. We see no objection against giving it a place in the regular "long prayer." When we pray for the needy and hungry, the persecuted and suffering, it should come out spontaneously that we also pray for a willing heart to share the wealth we have (in comparison with millions) with those who have "too little to live and too much to die." A study of II Corinthians 7-9 would bring to light that there is a circle of "*charis*," which means grace, as well as sharing, as well as gratitude. God gave His grace to us. We share in "grace" with the needy and suffering. Then their thanksgiving (the same word!) climbs to God's throne. Where there is an awareness of this circle of grace, there will be no problem with the ministry of mercy. It will abound, and we will abound in grace and gratitude.

P.S. For very specific, extraordinary causes a collection after the service at the door can always be organized.