

Why Does the Priest Wash His Hands during Mass?

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During the Preparation of the Altar and the Gifts, various movements are made. The gifts of bread and wine are processed forward by members of the liturgical assembly and received by the presider at the altar-table. The priest pours water into the wine. Finally, after incensing, usually the server pours a good quantity of water on both the fingers and the hands of the presider, who then uses a towel to dry his fingers and hands fully. The priest says inaudibly while washing his hands, “Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sin” (*The Sacramentary*, p. 371). (When the next edition of the Missal is promulgated, this book will be called the Roman Missal.) Because the prayer is inaudible, and because in most parishes music is being sung during the preparation rites, members of the liturgical assembly do not hear the personal prayer of the priest while washing his hands, yet see the washing of his hands. Thus, the question is often asked, “Why does the priest wash his hands at Mass?”

Currently, the “red book” the priest uses at Mass is called *The Sacramentary*. This ritual book contains the prayers and directions (called “rubrics,” which is Latin for red because the directions appear in red ink while the prayers are in black ink) for the Mass. In the front of this book is a document called the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM).



This document, which has a rich source of theology and liturgy, provides background theology and directions for those who prepare the liturgy. The GIRM states that “The priest then washes his hands at the side of the altar, a rite that is an expression of his desire for interior purification” (76). Thus, more than cleansing the hands is suggested by this prayer. Many of us tend to believe that the washing of his hands is a physical cleansing of the hands. Rather, the priest’s prayer during the washing is about the interior dimension of the priest so that he may be purified. The prayer also confirms this desire so that he may be cleansed from his sin and freed from iniquity. In the prayer, twice “my” is used to express that this is for the priest’s personal benefit. In addition, the rubrics or directions in *The Sacramentary*, states this is said inaudibly so that the liturgical assembly would not even hear the prayer. This, too, suggests that the prayer is for the presider’s own benefit. In other words, this is a spiritual and penitential prayer for the presider and not a communal prayer for the entire liturgical assembly.

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