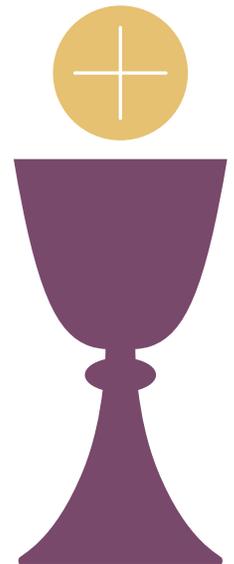


Celebrating Vibrant and Prayerful Liturgies

BY ANDREW D. CIFERNI, O.PRAEM.



Parishioners who participate in *Living the Eucharist* during Lent will have high expectations when they come to Sunday Mass. Many people in the parish will learn about the signs and symbols of the Eucharist through the bulletin inserts. Adults and teens will participate in small groups in which they will focus each week on a topic related to the Eucharist and pray over a passage from the upcoming Sunday lectionary readings using the *lectio divina* method. Families will gather once each week to learn about the Eucharist and focus on the gospel reading for the following Sunday. Other adults and teens will prepare for the Sunday Eucharist by reading the devotional booklet, *From Exodus to Easter: My Daily Journey Through Lent*.

Parishioners who participate in *Living the Eucharist* will be prepared for a more full, conscious, and active participation in the Eucharist. Priest celebrants can meet, and indeed exceed, these expectations by meditating on the following ways to prepare for and celebrate vibrant and prayerful liturgies.

BE PRAYER-FILLED

Ancient monastic practice divided the day into three roughly equal parts (aside from eating and sleeping): liturgical worship, manual labor, and *lectio divina*. The community was

soaked in the Word before the members came to worship and thus had a deeper understanding of and sensitivity to the working of God in and through the liturgy.

Liturgy is a specific type of prayer. It is worship, a corporate prayer. It demands attention to the others who are at prayer with me. It presumes that all the participants, but especially the principal ministers, will have prayed in other places and times before they come to the sacristy and the church.

If the homily is to truly give access to God's story, informing and interpreting the lives of the members of the assembly, then it must first inform and interpret the life of the preacher. Through prayer and study, he brings together in conversation God's story, his own story, and the parishioners' stories of faith as he serves as the community's primary pastoral minister with the Scriptures.

Make it a goal to ensure that all the liturgical ministers—the priest celebrant, homilist, deacons, lectors, music ministers, and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion—have available the readings for the upcoming Sunday. At the very least, can they commit to reading the scriptural texts (including the responsorial psalm) at least once every day in the week before

the Sunday they will be proclaimed? If this is done for a period of time it would be worthwhile, especially for the non-preaching ministers, to reflect and share in discussion how this practice informed their ministry in a new way.

BE ICONIC

Celebrants who come to the Eucharist from a deep and broad spiritual practice (including spiritual reading, celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, and spiritual direction) will celebrate the Eucharist as servants of Word and Table, as instruments of the real chief celebrant of the mystery of faith, Jesus Christ. To put it more critically, they will not come in the form of a television talk-show personality. They will realize “it is not about me.” Celebrants, like icons, open the assembly to the sacred.

All liturgical ministers might well challenge themselves to be self-observing outside the liturgy. How do their interactions with others exhibit signs of intentional attention and attentive listening to others, rather than self-centeredness? The attentiveness needed for deep listening and appropriate response to others at pastoral council meetings or in one-on-one conversations is the same needed for a style of liturgical ministry that does not give the impression that the ministry is “about me.”

BE PASTORAL

How a celebrant is perceived in the liturgy is less dependent on his “style” at chair, ambo, and altar than on how that priest has been perceived at the bedside of the homebound, in the confessional, or at a pastoral council meeting. On the other hand, the priest brings to his preaching and even his selection of texts a mind and heart shaped by his day-to-day pastoral ministry.

What might change in the assembly if the preacher began reading/studying/praying over the texts for the following Sunday at least from the preceding Monday? It would be



worthwhile for preachers to carry in their back pocket an index card or little notebook. They can record moments when the coming Sunday texts give them an insight into their daily pastoral care and when their pastoral care gives them a port of access into the readings.

BE GRACIOUS

Pope Benedict XVI has written and addressed himself to the *ars celebrandi*, the art of celebrating the liturgy. Worship in the Roman and Eastern churches is deeply sacramental. Matter, artfully shaped in architecture, music, sculptures, and painting, is worked by human hands to become sacramental, infallible vehicles of our relationship with God. So too the gestures, posture, and voice of the celebrant are to be practiced and carried out as a kind of sacramental choreography that creates the condition for the possibility of experiencing our God, who is one, true, good, and beautiful.

Where can liturgical ministers look for non-religious models of graciousness? Where can we see that “everybody steals from God”? Caring nurses, or hostesses and hosts who set a very careful table for their guests? Physicians, counselors,

and spiritual directors who really listen, who do not rush or interrupt or even respond before they have heard their clients out and thus do not allow their personalities to suck the air out of the room?

BE ORTHODOX

Orthodoxy means right *doxa*—praise—as well as meaning right doctrine. Every word, gesture, action, and object employed in the Eucharist, the shape of the space and, therefore, of the assembly in relation to the principal ministers: all of these carry and communicate a message about our relationship to the Father in Christ and the Holy Spirit and, in them, our relationship to one another. The liturgy is *theologia prima*, that is, the community's primary, usual, and normative word from God, to God, and about God. The liturgy is the privileged process of formation into and growth in the Body of Christ. The liturgy shapes our belief and our belief shapes our mission. Thus the celebration of the Eucharist demands of the celebrant utmost respect, reverence, and attention to the official texts and rubrics.

The call to be orthodox, however, is always in a certain tension with the call to be pastoral. Orthodoxy is not rubrical fundamentalism but an awareness and acceptance of the power of prayerfully and properly celebrated sacraments to lead the community to God and from there to service for the life of the world. Orthodoxy, pastorally applied, means that as celebrant I need to be aware of how I adapt the rites to meet pastoral needs, not simply my own likes and dislikes.

If ministers were to be questioned about their "adaptations" of the approved texts and rubrics, would they be able to explain their methodology and thought processes? Would these legitimize their assumption of authority over the Church's most basic process of formation? When one hears a minister changing a text or rubric does one stop later to theologically reflect on what difference it makes, for example, to say "happy are we who are called to this supper" rather than "happy are those who are called to this supper"?



On the other hand, can ministers of worship engage in an examen of consciousness to discern whether they are conscious of perhaps having failed to legitimately adapt text rubrics or having made legitimate choices without regard to concrete pastoral necessity?

BE PREPARED

The shape of the Eucharist in the Roman Catholic Church is deeply traditional, yet modified in every age. Deep and broad changes in the liturgy in the last fifty years have given the celebrant a range of choices to make: among others, the introductory rites, Penitential Act, Preface, and the Eucharistic Prayer.

The new translation of the Roman Missal will demand that the priest select and read the prayers for the presider in advance. That may be a cause of irritation but it is also an opportunity to encounter the mystery of faith in a new way.

The General Instruction on the Roman Missal is clear about the fact that a homily can be on a text (a Eucharistic



Prayer), a symbol (ashes), or even a rubric, posture, or gesture (receiving under both forms). What text, symbol, or action of the liturgy seems to cry out most for homiletic catechesis and might lead to deeper understanding and prayer among the members of the assembly?

BE AWARE

The occupational hazard of ritual is that it can lull participants into routine that drifts into a kind of double-mindedness, where the participants (celebrant, other ministers, and assembly) move through the rites while some quite different video is playing in their heads.

Celebrants need to be attentive to what they are saying and doing. This will become a habit if the ways of BEing mentioned above also become habitual. All these ways of BEing connect. The pastorally effective celebrant finds his homily preparation shaped by his reflection on his ministry and those together will inform his selection of options in the Missal. That quality of preparation will surely render him more consistently attentive to his role as leader of prayer in Christ's name throughout the celebration of the Eucharist.

This brings us back to BE prayer-filled. Lots of study and workshops might well improve the performance of liturgical ministers, but in the last analysis faith and prayer must inform performance. Otherwise our worship becomes good sacred opera but poor Eucharist. A baseline question asks ministers: how do they create those big and little moments of lectio or meditation that render us transparent instruments of Christ, the host and guest, the food and drink, the cantor and choreographer, at the Supper of the Lamb?

RECOMMENDED READING

Dennis C. Smolarski, SJ. *Eucharist and American Culture: Liturgy, Unity and Individualism*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2010.

Paul Turner. *At the Supper of the Lamb: A Pastoral and Theological Commentary on the Mass*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2011.

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