

# THE Church AT Worship

Theology, Spirituality,  
and Practice of  
Parish Liturgy

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*Nihil Obstat*

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outpouring of the Holy Spirit, given without measure (cf. Jn. 3:34), that we have become sharers in God's inmost life" (8). Thus is the free gift of God's promise superabundantly filled. The Eucharist is a mystery of Trinitarian love, a mystery in which we are called by grace to participate. The transformative power of the Eucharist is a shining forth of the life of the Trinity as we are caught up in the Trinitarian love of God, namely, of the Son's offering himself to the Father in the Holy Spirit.

The transcendent meaning of Trinitarian love reveals how something "this worldly" participates in that transcendent love, namely, human marriage. This oneness of the three Persons of the Trinity as the Father and Son existing in a relationship of endless giving and unity is what makes married love a sacrament of the love of God and why the pope refers to the Eucharist as a "nuptial sacrament."

The Eucharist, as the sacrament of charity, has a particular relationship with the love of man and woman united in marriage. . . . Indeed, in the theology of Saint Paul, conjugal love is a sacramental sign of Christ's love for his Church, a love culminating in the Cross, the expression of his "marriage" with humanity and at the same time the origin and heart of the Eucharist. (27)

## Both Internal and External

The relationship between the external and the internal at worship must be heeded for there to be good liturgy. Essential to the liturgy is an appropriate and harmonious interplay between what we do outwardly and what is to happen inwardly.

Good liturgy should be inwardly personal and outwardly communal. There's no doubt that our participation at liturgical celebrations should foster our personal relationship with God. Sacramental celebrations, most especially the Eucharist, should conform us more deeply inwardly to the life of Jesus Christ, insofar as we are called, through Baptism. Yet, that inward, personal relationship with the Lord cannot be isolated and individual. That which is most personal about our faith must be expressed outwardly in community through our participation in the faith and prayer of the Church. As Catholics, our faith is incomplete and lacking if it is not expressed through

participation in the prayer of the Church. As Catholics, there is no such thing as “praying in my own way” or having “my own faith in God.” While a personal element is part of prayer, it is always within the larger horizon of the faith of the Church.

This means we should understand our participation at liturgy as having both active and contemplative, or reflective, components. Our celebration of Mass, for example, is to have a rhythm that allows for times that are vocal and times that are silent. At times we are obligated to join in the communal responses and the singing, and at times we should be silent, entering into a common time of reflection. Unfortunately, we have not yet learned to weave the inward and outward well in our celebration of the Eucharist. We will become better at this as we participate in both modes—standing and sitting when we are to do that, responding and silently reflecting when the liturgy calls for those. The Mass seems busy when we do not allow for silence at the times the rite suggests: after each reading, the Homily, and after the Communion procession. And the liturgy is too quiet when the assembly does not respond and sing when that is their role. Praying the Mass includes entering into all of the responses and singing as a community, the gathered Body of Christ.

Therefore, good liturgy should speak of both resting in God and going out in mission to cooperate in building up God’s Kingdom. Certainly, we should be nourished at liturgy and find a peace and serenity that strengthen us. In that sense, there is an element of truth that Mass should “feel good” and that we should “get something out of it.” Unfortunately, many have made those two elements the sole criteria for determining good liturgy. Ultimately, Mass and all of the sacraments are about entering into the mystery of Jesus Christ’s Passion, Death, and Resurrection and being transformed to live more deeply in his image and likeness. Presumably, that will indeed make us “feel good,” because when we live in the image of Christ, we are living as God created us to live; we are following God’s will, and that should bring comfort and serenity. But the point of being transformed is to go into the world and be the agents who, through Christ, “and with him, and in him,” (from the doxology prior to the great “Amen” during the Mass) do the will of the Father in the world and make his love and glory known to all. That leads us to a third aspect of good liturgy: good liturgy is transformative.

## Transformation

If we think about the transformation that takes place as a part of our celebration of Mass, the first thing that may come to mind is the transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. We do ourselves an injustice, however, if we limit our understanding of transformation to the transformation of the bread and wine into the Eucharistic elements. Indeed, we need to look beyond the fact of the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of the Lord to understand the purpose of that Presence. The Lord is present in the Eucharist to give himself to us that we might be transformed to reflect and carry his presence in the world.

Toward that end, then, we should have a greater appreciation of how the Mass brings us into one action that has a rhythm and flow, leading toward the high point of sharing in the sacrificial meal, the holy banquet, where we enter into sacramental communion with the Lord as the culmination of our union with him in offering ourselves throughout the liturgy. For that to happen fruitfully, however, everything about our participation in the Mass should express our participation in the fullness of Eucharistic offering and transformation.

This starts as we gather for Mass. The way we come into the celebration of the Eucharist says a great deal about our readiness to be transformed. If we have come into Mass hurriedly, making Mass one stop in a series of things to do, we are not in the right frame of mind or spirit. We need to examine how we prepare to be transformed. Are we aware not only that something significant happens at Mass but also that something significant is to happen to us? Perhaps this is the most compelling argument for why we should dress up for Mass: how we are dressed matters greatly because the outward and the inward are connected. Taking the time to prepare for Mass by being attentive, even to our dress, signals that what we are entering into is not something ordinary but something out of the ordinary, something that demands our full, conscious, and active attention.

Our participation in the Liturgy of the Word also speaks to this. We believe that it is God who speaks to us in the proclamation of the readings from Sacred Scripture and that our engagement in the Word is alive. It is a living conversation between God and his people, and we should not be simply “following along” with the readings. When

we are speaking with someone or listening to a story, do we read along from a sheet of paper? When we see a play, do we read along with the script as the actors perform? Of course not! Neither should we read along with the readings at Mass. Our faces should not be buried in a worship aid, but rather we should be fully attentive to the reader proclaiming the Word. We listen to the Word of God at Mass, not as individuals but as a body, the Body of Christ.

To listen well to the Word during Mass, it is best to prepare by reading and praying over the Sunday readings beforehand. The readings at Mass are our opportunity to hear how God is asking us, in the circumstances of our lives, to enter into Christ's sacrifice here and now. The readings are God's way of telling us how we are to hand ourselves over to God at this place and time to die and rise with Christ in this celebration of the Eucharist. The Word of God is transformative as it issues the challenge, week after week, for us to change our lives and believe in the Gospel.

### *Questions for Further Reflection and Discussion*

1. What is your reaction to the statement, "If we're being victimized by bad liturgy, the problem is not with the liturgy, but with the way we are doing the liturgy"?
2. Based on your experiences, what are some elements that contribute to "good" liturgy?
3. What things of "this world" in the liturgy help you to encounter the transcendent or "other worldly"?
4. What does it mean for you to be inwardly transformed by liturgy? How can you be more open to interior transformation? In what ways can better exterior participation on your part foster greater interior participation?

### *For Further Reading*

*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (CSL), articles 1–4

*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 1076–1109

## CHAPTER 2

# Basic Liturgical Principles

### Ritualizing the Paschal Mystery

To understand how we pray at liturgy as the Body of Christ, we need to understand how ritual functions in liturgical prayer.

Simply stated, ritual is a patterned way of doing something. As individuals and families, we have rituals. Whether it's our routine for showering and dressing or habits that make up the rhythm of our family lives, we engage in structured, repetitive ritual behaviors.

The rituals of the Church define us as a community and make us who we are as a people, reborn and living in the image and likeness of Jesus Christ. Rituals create an identity, and they express a common life, a common way of viewing reality and dealing with the world. For Christians, the basic reality expressed in any ritual, any liturgical celebration, and any sacrament, is the Paschal Mystery.

The Paschal Mystery is about both Jesus's dying and rising and our dying and rising. It is the mystery that when we lose our life we find it; the mystery that happiness and fulfillment are found in lives of self-emptying love; and the mystery that through the Holy Spirit we die and rise with Christ in the sacraments. It is the "lens" through which Christians should see life, interpret life, and go through life.

Our entire life should be this dying and rising with Christ. Each moment should be a life of close union with Christ and his way. When we express this in ritual, we are saying that this is the very pattern of our lives, and that as his body, we are living this together.

That's why liturgy is not the priest and/or ministers doing "his thing" or "their thing," with everyone else watching. Liturgy is about our giving ourselves over to the Paschal Mystery: "If we have died with him, then we are also to live with him" (2 Timothy 2:11).

Ritual allows us to express in body, language, gesture, and movement what cannot be expressed any other way. How can the mystery of believing that Christ has died and risen, that he is still with us, and that he continues to share his life with us so that we might be “Christified,” ever be explained intellectually? It can’t be! So we say it the only way we know how: through water blessed and poured or sprinkled; through bread and wine brought forward, prayed over for transformation, broken, and distributed; through the laying on of hands and anointing with oil; through the fragrance of incense and the light of a Paschal candle that burns away the darkness of sin and death. The key is for all of us to understand and embrace it, as we proclaim, “Yes, that is the way we say it; that is the meaning of our lives, the full meaning of what it means to be a human person!”

Again, we all need to embrace it. We need to understand the signs and symbols, rituals and gestures we use. Understanding them with our head is the first step; beyond that, we have to take them into our heart. And the only way to do that is together.

## Beyond Individualism

Christian liturgical ritual challenges the individualism rampant in our society. True ritual is about transforming the “I” into the “we” of the Body of Christ. Those who understand the power of the rites know that the most personal experience of God we Catholics can have occurs in community—in the ritual prayer done by the Body of Christ. “Personal” does not equate with “individual.” We most certainly need individual times of prayer and individual experiences of God. But for Catholics, these are not enough, and they are not the deepest religious experiences we have. We all have to come to terms with finding the most powerful expressions of our relationship with God within the communal ritual liturgies of the Church, for that is where Christ is most powerfully present.

At liturgy, our personal preferences and individual inclinations are to give way to the communal meaning of what is taking place. This is difficult for us, since we are accustomed to “having it our way.” Liturgy is an act that is radically communal, an action of the body that expresses a common faith and identity in Christ. Again, though, this is hard for us to understand, living in an age and society

in which any sense of the larger common good and the need to defer or deny our needs for the sake of a greater value or communal ideal has been all but lost. The spirituality required for liturgy is a spirituality of handing oneself over to the action of the Church, an action in which we are participants according to our role.

At liturgical celebrations, we are to encounter Christ. The saving mystery of his Death and Resurrection is made present and effective in our space and time, and we are to join our offering to his, in the Holy Spirit, as an offering to the Father. Often overlooked, however, is that at liturgy we act as a member of the body, as a community. At the liturgy, we encounter the crucified, risen, exalted Lord whose presence is mediated through the ritual actions of the Church; it is Christ as he is present in his body and in the liturgical actions of that body. Therefore, personal devotional preferences and practices must give way in liturgy to the communal actions of the body; personal preference must yield to the prayer of the Church.

This gets played out in liturgy in movements and posture. As the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM), 42, states, “Attention must therefore be paid to what is determined by this *General Instruction* and by the traditional practice of the Roman Rite and to what serves the common spiritual good of the People of God, rather than private inclination or arbitrary choice.”

A common bodily posture is a sign of the unity of the members of the Christian community gathered together for the Sacred Liturgy, for it expresses the intentions and spiritual attitude of the participants and also fosters them.

Thus, letting go of personal preferences and inclinations is a way of fostering proper spiritual attitudes and intentions. The exterior is to foster and inculcate the interior. An example of this is in the reception of Holy Communion. In the United States, the norm for receiving Communion is for the recipient to approach the minister, make a bow of the head as a gesture of reverence, and receive Communion standing, either in the hand or on the tongue. This is the norm taught by the bishops, and approved by the Holy See, yet sometimes we see people insisting on adding other signs of reverence or using other postures. Priests, too, sometimes will add gestures or movements to the liturgy as a personal preference, or because they think it is a better way of doing something. Such displays by priest or layperson,

although appearing to be reverent, are contrary to the spirit of the liturgy. They reveal an attitude of “I want it my way.” I am reminded of CSL, 22, which states that “no one may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy.” Personal preference and devotion, even if it is reverent, must give way to the prescribed set of ritual behaviors that express the faith and common identity of the Body of Christ.

Handing ourselves over to the communal ritual is to hand ourselves over to the transformation from “me” into “we”—from individuals into the Body of Christ. We are to live in the world as servants who constantly empty ourselves of our needs and inclinations so that we can be deeply united with our brothers and sisters, seeing and responding to their needs before ours. That is the liturgy to be lived every day; it is the daily emptying ourselves of ourselves that is ritualized and rehearsed at liturgy. It’s the radical transformation from “me” into “we.”

### “Routine” and “Repetition” Are Not Bad Words!

Crucial to communal expressions that transform the “me” into “we” are routine and repetition. “Routine” and “repetition” are not inspiring words but are necessary elements of our spiritual growth and development in liturgy.

Some mistakenly think that liturgy—Mass, other sacramental celebrations, experiences of communal prayer such as Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer—should be interesting, and often “interesting” is associated with novelty. We think that, for something to hold our interest, it should always be new and different and flashy and captivating. This attitude, though, considers liturgy as entertainment, not as prayer, and reveals a consumer mentality toward liturgy, as though it were a product that, when “used” by the “consumer,” is to produce a predetermined effect. We need to purify ourselves of such mistaken notions about liturgy.

Liturgical celebrations are ritual prayer. Ritual forms shape us, not the other way around. Remembering this about liturgy helps us to have the proper starting point. It is indeed true that liturgy is ritual prayer that is enacted by the Body of Christ. However, although we must be fully engaged and participate in the liturgy, ultimately the liturgy is not our action. The liturgy is Christ’s prayer, Christ’s action

in which we join. Liturgy is not what we make it; it is the Paschal Mystery made present to us. The mystery is made present to shape us, form us, and transform us. The patterned behavior puts us in touch with the mysterious presence of the holy.

For that to happen, however, there must be routine and repetition so that the action is familiar to all. If we are focused on figuring out what will happen next, we cannot lose ourselves in the sacred mystery. If we have to “follow along” with what someone else is doing, in the way an audience follows along with or watches a performer, we are not fully, consciously, and actively participating in the sacred mystery and we cannot give ourselves over to be transformed by it.

In our use of the word “mystery,” we don’t mean “that which is unknown or unfamiliar” or “that which is totally other-worldly.” What is meant by “mystery,” in the sense of the “sacred mystery,” is that which is most real, most revelatory of God, that which expresses who we are in God and that which forms us to more perfectly be his people. Thus, by “sacred mystery” we mean that in the liturgical celebration, through the Church’s remembrance and the action of the Holy Spirit, we encounter Christ and his saving power made present for us in our space and time. To quote St. Leo the Great, “What was visible in the Redeemer, has passed over into the sacraments.” The word “mystery” has a precise meaning when used in the context of liturgical theology. It is mystery in the sense of something so real and present to us that it forms the foundation of our lives. It’s a divine reality that should be so close to us that it defines who we are, marking our identity as Christians and setting the terms for the way we live. By mystery, we mean something so profound that it expresses everything we believe about the way life should be lived.

## It’s All about the Paschal Mystery

What do we mean by the Paschal Mystery? The Paschal Mystery is the dynamic passage of the life-giving, Spirit-filled movement of the Son completely offering himself to the Father, culminating in his complete offering in his Death on the Cross and his being raised to new life, his exaltation as our Risen Lord and his transformation into glory. The deed happened once in history, yet the saving power of that divine reality is made real and present and effective in our time

and space through the power of the Holy Spirit as the Church enacts her ritual celebrations. The Paschal Mystery is celebrated in every liturgy, but especially and most centrally in the Eucharist.

Sometimes, however, we tend to limit our understanding of the mystery. For example, it is not uncommon for people to think of the central mystery of Mass as being the Consecration, the transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. To be sure, that most certainly happens, and we believe deeply in the Real Presence of the Lord in the Eucharist. But if we stop there and do not appreciate the wider context and meaning of what is taking place in the celebration of the Eucharist, we do a disservice to the rich theology of the Eucharist and also to our spirituality and sense of participation in the sacrament. In fact, we might inadvertently wind up distancing ourselves from the celebration, not entering into the fullness of participation as the Church intends.

If our understanding of Mass is nothing deeper than our watching the priest consecrate bread and wine, followed by our receiving Holy Communion, we are relegating ourselves to a passive notion of participation and opening the door to turning the Eucharist into a kind of “object”—something that is to be passively received—and shutting ourselves out from entering into the deeper reality to which the celebration calls us.

A deeper understanding of the Paschal Mystery, however, reminds us that throughout the celebration of the Eucharist we are being swept up in the dynamic mystery of Christ offering himself to the Father, as we are invited to join the offering of our life to his offering. As the words, actions, signs, and symbols of the liturgy express and unfold the reality of Christ’s active presence in the assembly, in the priest, in the Word, and in the memorial of the Lord’s sacrifice as proclaimed in the Eucharistic actions of taking (Presentation of the Gifts), blessing (the Eucharistic Prayer), breaking (the Fraction Rite), and giving (the Communion procession), we are called to encounter the mystery that the meaning of our life is to be the same as Christ’s: that we are to give our lives away in love to one another the way he gave his life for us. We encounter and enter into the divine passage, the salvific power of his Death and Resurrection, and we die and rise with him. Through both interior and exterior participation (never one without the other), we become one with the

divine mystery made present: the mystery that to find one's life, one must lose it; the mystery that to live means to hand everything over to God in trust; and the mystery that God always raises us up.

With that understood, the Consecration of the bread and wine can be understood in its full context. The Eucharistic Jesus gives himself to us as food so that we might be transformed to live the mystery we have ritualized. We share in the intimacy of Holy Communion with the Lord and our brothers and sisters as both the outward sign and the culmination of our communion in participating in the mystery with the Lord and our brothers and sisters, as we die to sin and selfishness and rise to new life in and through the Lord.

The profound mystery of dying and rising is not only at the heart of the liturgical celebration but of how we are to live as Christians. Liturgy must refer us to Christ and bring us into contact with him. It is always the faith of the Church, a faith that, although it must be appropriated personally, does not belong exclusively to oneself. Our faith must be more than something that expresses what is relevant or meaningful for an individual or group at a given moment.

The repetition and routine in liturgy prevent us from using liturgy as a way of making our relationship with God into only what we want it to be. Remember, liturgy forms and shapes us; we do not form and shape it.

To be sure, not everything is always exactly the same in liturgy. Scripture readings change. Legitimate options for using different prayer texts exist. Musical selections should vary, although not too widely since they must be familiar enough so that the faithful will join in the singing. In addition, liturgy should never be rote or lifeless; energy and enthusiasm should be evident among all who participate. All this occurs, however, within the larger framework of the routine and repetition that are the heart of a communal action with which everyone is familiar and in which everyone participates. Such routine and repetition create the rhythm and logic of the ritual flow into which all can enter.

Thus, liturgy is communal ritual prayer that has its own rhythm and logic. Liturgy must be entered into with a sense of timelessness, allowing the ritual to unfold. The challenge is to lose ourselves in the ritual so that the transformative power of God at work through the presence of the Risen Jesus—in other words, the power of grace—can

be effectively present in our lives, transforming us into deeper union with Jesus, more closely following his way.

## Losing Self in Ritual

Catholics are called to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations whereby they literally lose themselves in what is taking place. Ritual patterns are powerful and have an effect on us. They form us and mold us into being the Body of Christ, the presence of Jesus in the world, if we let them.

Two of the greatest enemies of good liturgy are efficiency and practicality. Efficiency and practicality focus on getting things over with as quickly and with as little effort as possible. They turn the liturgy into a series of outward actions to be mechanically performed. The subtle message is that we need only do these actions to have done enough. It is as though the simple performance of the actions eases our consciences that we have done our duty toward God and can go home and continue with our week.

Good liturgy has everything to do with ritual and symbol. It involves handing ourselves over to something larger than ourselves. As we give ourselves over to ritual process in liturgical celebration, we should have the sense that we are entering into something that we cannot stop until the rhythm of the action is complete. Unlike a play or concert that is dependent upon the actions of the performers, liturgy is about entering into the mysterious actions that put us in touch with the holy, because ultimately the actions are dependent upon the action of Jesus Christ. Liturgical participation, then, means handing ourselves over to an experience that, for a little while, puts us outside of time and that has its own rhythm and logic. Yet, we often don't let liturgy have that power over us.

One reason for that might be due to a misunderstanding of the nature of ritual. Perhaps we don't fully grasp how ritual works and how the patterned forms of worship shape and mold us. Or, perhaps we know on some intuitive level that liturgy forms and shapes us, changes us, and transforms us, and that scares us. Perhaps we're afraid on some level to die and rise with the Lord, afraid to let go of whatever he is calling us to surrender, and afraid to let him make us into something new. If that's true, then it makes sense that we don't

want to hand ourselves over to an experience in which we lose control and let God grace us in ways of his choosing, ways which we could never predict.

This is part of the reason why we don't make up our rituals and why priests and deacons who preside at sacramental celebrations should not change the words of the rite (except in the clear instances in which the ritual allows them to use their own words). When we try to tamper with the rites, we're sending a subtle message that we don't believe that the Church's rituals as handed on to us have the power to transform. In essence, we're saying that we as individuals know better than the Church.

We can ask how long Mass (or any liturgical celebration) should take. The answer in terms of understanding ritual dynamics is that it should take however long it takes to reverently enact the ritual with everyone's full, conscious, and active participation. It should take however long it takes to be confronted with the power of the Word, the symbols, the gestures, the silence, the ritual actions, and the sacrament so that we encounter the holy and are transformed just a little bit more into living the life of Christ. We should allow the rhythm of the rite to unfold so that all are caught up in the communal prayer that is larger than any person. Of course, neither should any liturgical celebration be needlessly stretched. Liturgy is never an occasion for adding what we feel like doing at the moment or the latest good idea. Being faithful to the rite means understanding how the parts relate to one another and knowing which parts of the rite are central and which are secondary.

Liturgy is not a series of disconnected actions. It should not be interpreted as "first we do this, then we do that." We should be able to enter into a liturgical ritual because of its internal logic and rhythm, thereby losing ourselves in it so that we can be transformed.

The internal rhythm for the celebration of Mass, for example, flows like this: gathering and coming together as one (Introductory Rites, secondary in importance), being challenged by the Word (Liturgy of the Word, primary importance), which leads us to uniting ourselves at the altar with Christ's sacrifice (Liturgy of the Eucharist, primary importance), and then, having died and risen with Christ in the Eucharist, we go out to live the Christian mission (Concluding

Rites, secondary importance). All of these parts must be allowed to unfold as envisioned in the liturgical books.

We can err by overloading one of the parts of the rite. For example, when the announcements after Communion are too lengthy, there is the sense that something not in sync with the rite is intruding. The rhythm of being nourished at the table and taking what we have received, and how we have been transformed, into the world to build up the Kingdom of God is thwarted. The same is true when a speaker at the end of Mass takes too long. The disproportion in time and the juxtaposition of the placement within the ritual can make it seem as though the end of Mass is overshadowing the central action of the Communion Rite. The Communion Rite, rather than being the pinnacle of the Eucharistic celebration, winds up seeming like the prelude to another event. (This is the rationale behind discouraging long eulogies at funeral Masses.)

Suffice it to say that the liturgical celebration needs to be viewed as a whole to make sure that the most central actions are not overshadowed in any way by less important parts of the liturgy.

At the same time, this does not mean that nothing is ever “added on” to Mass. It is quite appropriate for sacramental celebrations to take place within the context of Sunday Eucharist. Some people groan when a Baptism or a ritual that is part of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) takes place at Mass, but in doing so, they miss the point that sacraments are communal celebrations belonging to the whole Church. Of course, it is absolutely essential to understand the relationship of all of the parts of the rites so that two sacraments are not just thrown together, and so that the ritual is done correctly. Liturgical preparers should have more than just good will; they should have a proper background in liturgy.

Returning to our question of how long Mass (or any liturgical celebration) should take, the answer involves being faithful to the rite. It should take however long it takes to reverently enact the ritual with everyone’s full, conscious, and active participation. The goal is that we should leave the liturgy a little more like Christ, living his life more faithfully. When we experience such change, such transformation at Mass or at any liturgy, we understand the statement from STL, 5: “Good celebrations can foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken it.”

## Again, Both Internal and External

That statement from *Sing to the Lord* highlights the need to pay attention to the externals as well as the internals, because the outward things, and the way we enact them, can have an effect on an individual's faith. That is an awesome responsibility for people involved with liturgy. Of course, we should never cop out by placing sole responsibility for "getting something out of Mass" on the externals alone. Liturgy is not performance; we're not attending a show where we have the right to judge whether we were adequately entertained. However, there is a legitimate "performative" aspect of liturgy, and people have the right to judge whether what was outward was done adequately—in other words, whether the externals adequately provided the potential to be engaged in the mystery.

The externals are to engage people in the celebration of mystery. Engagement in the mystery should not transport us to a world that is disconnected from the reality of life. The mystery in which we should be engaged is that of the Crucified-Risen Jesus who is among us and is transforming us. The mystery that we encounter in the liturgy is the Paschal Mystery of Jesus's passage of transformation, his passage of Death-into-Resurrection. We hand ourselves over to this mystery so that we die and rise with Christ as his Paschal Mystery is made real, present, and active to us and for us. We must be engaged in the mystery of transformation so that we can go into the world and, as much as possible, do what we have been commanded to do: continue his work of building up the Kingdom of God.

That transformation should happen internally and should be connected to what we have brought to the liturgy. However, that internal participation is fostered by and connected with external participation. This is why the externals matter.

Good celebrations that foster faith occur when the liturgy is "performed" properly. The correct "performative" aspect is not in terms of entertainment value, nor is it defined solely as everything running smoothly. Rather, the correct "performative" aspect is found when proper care and reverence are displayed in the objects used and in the way everyone associated with the liturgy—priest celebrant, deacon, reader, leader of song, instrumentalist, choir, extraordinary

ministers of Holy Communion, ushers, altar servers, and members of the assembly—conducts themselves.

The way we speak, act, and move in liturgy should convey that it is not “business as usual.” We should look, sound, stand, and sit differently at liturgy than we do, say, at a play, a concert, or in the bleachers at a soccer game. Our postures, movements, and spoken and sung words should not be stilted or phony, as though we were entering into an unreal world, nor should they be somber (after all, Christ is risen!). Rather, they should be appropriately serious and focused, since what we do at liturgy is the most important thing we do in life. Does our outward celebration (our “performance”) of the liturgy convey this? Or does it convey that this is just some other ordinary thing we do, something to be done as quickly and conveniently as possible? The more poetic, somewhat higher or elevated register of the language used in the new translation of *The Roman Missal* helps to convey the “not business as usual” atmosphere insofar as the language, although still understandable English, is not the same as conversational English.

Parishes can easily attend to the externals that contribute to the enactment of good liturgies that will foster and nourish faith. For example, is care given to the liturgical objects, such as the sacred vessels and liturgical books? Are the vessels clean and shiny, attractive to the eye and in good condition? Are the liturgical books, such as the Missal and the Lectionary, in good shape, or are covers worn and broken and pages shoddy? Is the worship space clean and uncluttered, or are there papers and books left on the altar, and tables with pamphlets, old bulletins, and other paraphernalia strewn about? Caring for the externals also applies to people themselves. Are the liturgical ministers well trained and thoroughly familiar with the rite so that when they move about they do so gracefully and orderly? Do the presider and the musicians understand and respect the rhythm of the liturgy, and therefore, enhance the external aspects by avoiding rushing and allowing for appropriate periods of silence?

All of these elements of ritual are vitally important because liturgy manifests a reality, specifically, the reality of the Church as the Body of Christ. Therefore, to properly understand liturgy, one has to properly understand Church, and how the Church is manifested in the liturgy. CSL, 26, sums this up:

Liturgical services are not private functions but are celebrations belonging to the Church, which is the “sacrament of unity,” namely, the holy people united and ordered under their bishops.

Therefore, liturgical services involve the whole Body of the Church; they manifest it, and have effects upon it; but they also concern the individual members of the Church in different ways, according to their different orders, offices, and actual participation.

### Unity, Participation, Roles, Identity

Notice that the Church is the “sacrament of unity.” A liturgical celebration is a manifestation of our unity. Certainly unity refers to our oneness of mind and heart. It also refers to our common faith, which we all profess in the Profession of Faith (the Creed) at Mass. However, being a “sacrament of unity” is also much more than this. Let’s not water down unity simply to mean getting along with each other or everyone sharing the same viewpoint. Although unity includes these internal dispositions, we often overlook another element of unity, one that is part of our very definition of Church.

Being a “sacrament of unity” is defined as being “the holy people united and ordered under their bishops.” There is a visible structure of belonging that is manifested at liturgy. We cannot truthfully celebrate liturgy unless we are the holy people united and ordered under our bishops. During the Eucharistic Prayer, when we pray for our pope and our bishop by name, we are doing something more than nicely praying for our pope and bishop in a spiritual sense. We are making an important concrete statement that we must be and are visibly united with them. The liturgy that is being celebrated is authentic only because it is in communion with them.

That’s not all there is to being this “sacrament of unity,” however. Remember, a sacrament is a visible sign that manifests a spiritual reality. The reality is that we are united as the Body of Christ in the Church, and that liturgical services involve the whole Church. The visible sign of that is that the different orders and roles, and the participation according to role.

All of us are called to participate fully, actively, and consciously in the liturgical action of joining ourselves to Christ in offering ourselves to the Father. We don’t all do so in the same way, however.

This is not to say that there are better or worse, or more complete and less complete, ways of participating, but it is to say that participation is different according to one's role: a bishop participates according to his role as a member of the episcopacy; a priest participates according to his role as a member of the presbyterate; a deacon, according to his role as a member of the diaconate; the baptized according to their role as baptized; catechumens according to their role as catechumens. The differences in roles speak of the different relationships within the community. Not everyone does the same thing at the same time. There are different roles according to one's office and one's identity within the Body of Christ. Understanding these roles and identities, and the relationships among them, makes for good celebrations of liturgy. More will be said about this in chapter three, in discussing liturgical participation.

For now, it can be noted that another way of saying this is that the liturgy is hierarchically ordered. Unfortunately, to some, "hierarchy" connotes "clericalism." In truth, however, the two need not have anything to do with each other. To say that the liturgy is hierarchically ordered is to say that it is structured or ordered in such a way that specific roles flow from one's relationship to the community.

This is true in liturgy because it is true in the life of the Church. That we are a holy people united and ordered under our bishops, with each possessing different orders and functions, is the reality of who we are as the Body of Christ in the world today, and so it is also the reality of who we are at liturgy, since liturgy manifests the reality of the Church. Ritual expresses identity.

This means that the liturgy should form us in our Catholic identity. During worship, we approach God through ritual behavior; in other words, we are praying using a set of behaviors—words, actions, music—that are the community's expression of the faith that has been handed on. As liturgical scholar Father Robert Taft often quips, "Religion is not a personal philosophy of life." Our faith should give us a communal identity, a shared frame of reference with our sisters and brothers with whom we are united in Baptism.

When we come to worship, we should recognize that we are there to be transformed to be more deeply united to Jesus Christ and to live his life. To be united to Jesus, however, means to be united to his body, the Church, which means our sisters and brothers. We should

be transformed to recognize that we share with our sisters and brothers in the Body of Christ the greatest gift of all, the gift of faith. That gift of faith means we recognize our oneness with others in the way we live and in the way we identify ourselves in the world. That's how ritual practices shape who we are.

Do we understand that liturgy is about this formation into a Catholic identity? At its deepest level, liturgy is about belonging to the Church, since it is the Church as a body that is engaging in the ritual behavior. This means our very identities as persons must be connected to our belonging to Jesus and to his body.

The new translation of the Mass that was implemented on the First Sunday of Advent in 2011 is to lead us deeper into our identity as Catholics who worship God according to our tradition. Words matter, and so we are not simply to have learned some new words at Mass, but we are to think and pray about how those new words shape who we are and what we believe.

Our liturgical rituals, as they are enacted in word, song and gesture, are supposed to shape who we are and what we look like as we interact with the world. Do we allow them to do that? Holy days of obligation are a good example of this. Part of our identity is that there are certain liturgical days—beyond every Sunday—that are so important that attending Mass on those days should be part of the definition of who we are.

Perhaps we have lost a certain sense of distinctiveness of what it means to be Catholic. Catholics should be known by the public things they do. Certainly, we should be known by our acts of love and charity toward others, as we live out our baptismal mission to build the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice, love, equality, and peace. We also should be known by distinctive rituals we do, both in and outside of the liturgy, such as going to Mass every Sunday and holy day of obligation, abstaining from meat on Fridays during Lent, and fasting on days as required by the Church. Going to Mass, indeed, to any liturgical celebration, should never be just “going to it.” We should recognize the liturgy as an opportunity to be formed in the way we identify ourselves to the world: as people who share a communal Catholic faith, and who, therefore, share a particular way of being and acting in the world.

## Liturgical Leadership and Preparing Celebrations

Such an understanding of the nature and power of ritual behavior as constitutive of liturgical action shapes the way we approach not only our participation in liturgy but our approach to preparing liturgies. We want to prepare liturgical celebrations as carefully as possible, whether we are preparing for a feast, solemnity, or season. Preparations should ensure that the Church celebrates those liturgies with the appropriate degree of reverence, decorum, and prayerfulness. What are some basic, foundational principles to keep in mind when it comes to preparing liturgies?

Often people will speak of being “creative” in the preparation of liturgy and of trying to make liturgies more “meaningful.” We don’t have to plan a liturgy, since the rite is already given to us, as much as we have to prepare it. As we look at the rite, we need to envision how we enact the prayers, gestures, and movements, in the order they are given to us, so that all may participate in the rite fully, consciously, and actively.

The rite is to be enacted as given to us by the Church so that Christ shines forth brightly through his presence in the liturgy. After all, isn’t that the bottom line—to manifest Christ? The problem with an inappropriate creativity is that we wind up changing the ritual and run the risk of manifesting ourselves instead of Christ. A ritual is a patterned expression, owned by the community, that communicates the presence of Christ. As Roman Catholics, by “community,” we mean the Church, not just our parish community or other sub-group.

If I were to change the rites for the celebration of Mass, or for Eucharistic Exposition and Benediction, or for Holy Thursday or Good Friday or the Easter Vigil, the rites would become the DeGrocco Rites rather than the Roman Catholic rite. Those rites would manifest my personal understanding of Christ’s presence in the liturgy, rather than the Church’s understanding. In essence, the rites would be personal rites appropriated by me rather than communal rites celebrated by a body. Those working in liturgy must always be sure they are enacting the rites of the Church, not their group’s or individual interpretation of the rites.

Sometimes, the rites of the Church are inadvertently usurped because of a desire for relevance. Seeking to make the rites relevant

can result in the insertion of a subjective focus into worship and the focus becoming ourselves. Those who work in preparing liturgies must always be sure they have the proper knowledge of the history of the rites and the theological and liturgical meaning of all of its components. They should understand that sometimes changing something might change the meaning of the rite, insofar as liturgy is a language that communicates something.

Those involved in liturgy might ask themselves: “Do I believe that the Church’s rites, as they are given to us, have the power to manifest Christ and effectively communicate God’s grace?” I would hope the unanimous answer to that question would be “yes.” If the answer is “no,” in essence we are saying that any individual can think that she or he knows better than the Church, who has given us these rites under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As noted previously, CSL clearly states that no one, including the priest, has the right to change anything on his or her own.

There is, of course, plenty of room within the liturgy for appropriate creativity. Often options are given for choices of prayers, readings, movements, music, and certain words such as introductions that can be selected by the priest, deacon, or other ministers (for example, liturgical preparers and musicians). Good liturgy preparation involves being thoroughly familiar with the rite and taking full advantage of the options and possibilities offered by it. The key is to work within the rite. If the rites of the Church are not meaningful, I would venture to say that the difficulty is not with the rites, but with our lack of understanding and appreciation of them.

However, while we must uphold the objective nature of liturgy and must never change anything on our own, we must also avoid the other extreme of turning liturgy into a dry, timeless, Platonic idea that negates the incarnational aspect of our worship. The enacted rites do not, and need not, look exactly the same down to every detail from diocese to diocese and parish to parish. It is possible to be faithful to the rubrics and the laws of liturgy and still have some degree of legitimate adaptation and variation. In short, there are times in which appropriate creativity within the liturgy is permissible.

To be frank (and, with apologies if this sounds self-serving), this is why liturgists are needed. A caution is necessary here: not everyone who works in liturgy or likes liturgy is a well-trained liturgist. The

study of liturgical theology and history, training in the pastoral art of liturgy, and understanding the meaning and structure of the Church's sacraments and liturgy are components that make up a liturgist.

With such knowledge, liturgical preparation can be approached and decisions made about liturgy from an understanding of the liturgy from within. Such depth of knowledge and understanding allows an appreciation of the depth and beauty of our liturgical tradition provided in the rubrics of the rites of the Church. The trained liturgist knows that superficial gimmicks don't work and avoids anything akin to an entertainment model of engagement. Instead, the trained liturgist understands the true meaning of full, conscious, and active participation in the mysteries being celebrated and recognizes the proper means for drawing the faithful into those mysteries.

Understanding the liturgy from within provides the means for appropriate creativity. The instructions in the ritual books show that the priest or preparation committee often may choose among options and that adaptations often are given in the rites. (The content of our ritual books may be one of our best kept secrets! All involved in liturgy must read and reread the ritual books to be thoroughly familiar with them.) Attention to differences in the liturgical year becomes an important aspect to understanding the liturgy from within. Use of processions, the opening up of the symbols in various ways, and the use of legitimate optional rites go into this as well. There is a big difference between, on the one hand, decisions made about how a particular liturgy will be enacted because one has read the rubrics, understands the options given by the Church, has an informed sense of ritual practice and the depth of our tradition, signs, and symbols, and knows how to facilitate the participation of the faithful in an authentic way, and, on the other hand, decisions made by someone who gets a good idea and wishes to add his or her expression of piety or way of doing something. Personal preference and individual piety must give way to the communal faith expressed in the rites.

"Doing it by the book" must never become an excuse for laziness and sterility. Paring the rites down to bare minimalism can be a kind of abuse of the liturgy, if it is a way of imposing one's personality or agenda on the liturgy and may prevent the richness of our signs and symbols from shining through. We need to avoid the extremes of being too loose and too rigid in the enactment of our celebrations.

Such care and attention is crucial, precisely because we are dealing with faith and touching hearts at liturgy. Everyone wants his or her heart and soul to be touched in a personal way by an experience of the holy at liturgy. Everyone wants to have his or her personal relationship with God nourished and nurtured at worship.

These are admirable goals, and it is hoped they are achieved at the Church's liturgical celebrations. At the same time, we need to be careful about a misunderstanding of personalizing the liturgy. We must remember that liturgy is Christ's prayer, the prayer of his body, the Church; it is not something we create, but something that has been given to us. In the end, liturgy is not any one person's expression of his or her faith or spirituality; rather, the Church's faith is essentially a communal faith. The liturgy must not be about any one of us and our needs as individuals; it is always about the Paschal Mystery, made present and effective here and now for our salvation.

What are some ways that we can be appropriately creative and varied in our preparation of the liturgy? Certainly the first area that comes to mind is in the selection of music. Hymns, responses, Mass settings, and chants are all possibilities for varying the liturgy. Music is chosen according to the liturgical norms described in *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* and according to the norms in the ritual books. The music must, of course, possess artistic quality, and it must support and be consistent with the liturgical action at which it occurs and for which it is intended. (These criteria are outlined and discussed in *Sing to the Lord*.)

There also may be the opportunity to select Scripture readings. While sometimes the readings are "proper" for a liturgy and cannot be changed, at other times, readings can be selected from among a host of choices. This occurs with wedding and funeral liturgies. Because of unfamiliarity with the Word of God, some people think that the readings at the liturgy do not contain a personal message for them. (That is why they may request to select a non-biblical reading, an option that is not permitted). Yet, what could be more personal and meaningful than the way God speaks to us directly through the proclamation of his divinely inspired Word? What more could be said beyond the Sacred Word that was written under the divine guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit?

Petitions are a third way to appropriately personalize a liturgy, and they can usually be originally composed for any liturgy, including Sunday Masses. The petitions of the Universal Prayer, or Prayer of the Faithful, are to express the prayers of the particular assembly gathered at that particular liturgy, as the assembly as a body prays for its needs and the needs of the whole world. Weddings, funerals, and other celebrations such as Baptisms and Confirmations can all have originally composed petitions that best suit the needs and dispositions of the particular gathered community.

### The Limits of Liturgy

When worshippers better understand these aspects of liturgy, they can better appreciate the proper way to personalize the liturgy. Such proper understanding will help to prevent the expectation that liturgy will do what it cannot do. Liturgy cannot be expected to bear the burden for the entirety of the Christian spiritual life. Since liturgy cannot do it all, we have to be careful that we are not expecting too much from our liturgical celebrations. That might sound like a strange thing to say, but it is true. The liturgy is limited in what it can do, and we must avoid placing an undue burden on our liturgical celebrations.

For example, it is true that liturgy builds up community. Our liturgical celebrations, especially the Eucharist, express and deepen our oneness with Christ and with one another as members of his body. However, we have to be careful not to misinterpret that to mean liturgy is supposed to create some kind of “feel good” experience of community based on our subjective needs. The unity liturgy manifests and deepens is our oneness in living the mystery of Jesus Christ—the way we live a life of self-giving, in imitation of and as a participation in the self-offering of Jesus. That is the deepest intimacy we share as Christians, deeper than any bond of community we might create.

Unfortunately, though, we often limit definitions of community simply to superficial areas such as shared interests, common backgrounds, or people with whom we already are acquainted. When we think liturgy should deepen those kinds of bonds alone, we are distorting the liturgical celebration to be more about celebrating

ourselves than a ritualization of entering into the Paschal Mystery. Perhaps the complaint that Catholic liturgy is impersonal might stem from a false perception of the kind of community we are to experience at liturgy.

Ultimately, our participation in the liturgy is our participation in Christ's prayer to the Father; it is Christ's prayer, not ours. We don't own it, and it is not about us. When we use the word "celebrate" in reference to liturgy, it is a different sense of the word than is usually associated with it. It is "celebration" in the sense of the Church's proclaiming and calling to mind what God has done for us in Jesus. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ's saving mystery is made real, present, and effective for us in the celebration so that we might be transformed by it. The goal of the transformation is to participate more deeply in the life of Christ.

Hence, another limit to the liturgy: the performative aspect of liturgy depends on what people bring to it. The performative aspect will be affected by how the Christian life is lived. While there is never any excuse for poor readers, poor music, poor priest celebrants, etc., we must remember that all those external elements for good liturgy might be present, yet our participation in the liturgy might still be lacking something: it might be lacking our bringing an authentically lived Christian life to the celebration.

The liturgy is limited in yet another way: the liturgy cannot be the totality of our prayer life. Yes, it is true that liturgy is the source and summit of our Christian life (cf. CSL, 10), and the celebration of Mass is the most perfect prayer we offer to the Father, insofar as it is the prayer of the total Christ, Head and members. Our participation in that prayer, however, cannot occur in a vacuum. It is only the offering of our daily prayer that truly allows the celebration of the Eucharist to be the source and summit of our spiritual life. If we feel that we are not getting enough out of our participation in the Mass, perhaps the remedy can be found in enriching our spiritual life outside of Mass.

To say that there are limits to the liturgy, then, is to in no way say that Christ is somehow lacking, or that sacramental grace is insufficient, or that God is not completely present to us. Rather, it is to point out the challenge to make sure we are not imposing self-referential expectations on the liturgy, and that we are not trying to

manipulate liturgical celebrations for our purposes. Ultimately, each liturgy is the Church's celebration of the mystery of salvation won for us in Jesus Christ, made real and effective and present for us here and now, in our midst, so that we might be brought into that mystery as we unite the offering of ourselves with Christ's offering. It is on those terms that we must build our expectations of what liturgy should do for us.

### ***Questions for Further Reflection and Discussion***

1. How does the routine and repetition of ritual behavior help form your Catholic Christian identity?
2. What does it mean for you to hand yourself over to the rhythm and flow of ritual behavior, that is, lose yourself in the ritual?
3. What external aspects of liturgy help you to internally experience the holy?
4. How can you better appreciate liturgy "from within"?
5. In what ways are you still perhaps too individualistic in your understanding of liturgy?
6. Based on this chapter, what is your understanding of "mystery"?

### ***For Further Reading***

*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 5–13

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1066–1075, 1136–1144