

LITURGICAL CATECHESIS AND THE SACRAMENTARY



There was terrible confusion everywhere. If somebody did not like a devotion or prayer, he simply called it “unliturgical”. Others, on the contrary, used the word liturgical for name-calling. A person who was just queer or “arty” or somehow different in his views was given the stamp: he is a liturgist. You could hardly say anything worse of him under the law of Christian charity. Being liturgical smacked not only of heresy, stubbornness and a hankering for novelty it was almost a moral blemish. (*Orate Fratres* [Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1939], 152.)

If you think this was written to describe the current state of liturgy in the United States, you couldn't be more wrong. This was written in 1939 by one of the early pioneers of the liturgical movement to describe the state of affairs of the early heroic days of the liturgical revival.

One could say people experienced a similar confusion when the changes in the Mass were implemented following the Second Vatican Council. A common evaluation of this time notes there was a lack of an appropriate catechesis on “why” the changes in the Mass occurred. One person summed up the catechesis in her parish by saying, “Father simply announced that the church said we should do it whether we like it or not.” For the ordinary Catholic in the pew, the liturgical reforms were experienced when changes in the Mass occurred, like the transition to praying in the vernacular or having the priest face the people during Mass. Many Catholics embraced the changes while others found them hard to accept. The alterations were so sweeping that we sometimes became lost in them, losing sight of the fact that the real significance of the liturgical reform was not praying in English or exchanging a sign of peace but, rather, the sanctification and transformation of people. *The Constitution on the Sacred liturgy (CSL)* states:

From the liturgy, therefore, particularly the eucharist, grace is poured forth upon us from a fountain; the liturgy is the source for achieving in the most effective way possible human sanctification and God's glorification, the end to which all the Church's other activities are directed. (*CSL*, #10)

A different kind of confusion is making its way among the faithful in the wake of the recent publication of the new *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)*, and it is true that history tends to repeat itself. Many of us experienced the following example of catechesis on the *GIRM*: Father came out before Mass, announced that Rome had made more changes in the Mass and then proceeded to read a list:

- ✱ We will now bow in the Creed at the words “by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man”
- ✱ We will now stand at the words “Pray, brothers and sisters, that our sacrifice may be acceptable”
- ✱ Everyone should bow their heads before receiving Communion
- ✱ The priest will no longer leave the sanctuary during the sign of peace
- ✱ End of catechesis.

Currently we await an approved English translation of the *Sacramentary*. Will our catechesis be limited to merely instructing the faithful on the new translations for our responses or familiar prayers at Mass, or will we seize the moment and provide liturgical formation that truly leads people to grasp more deeply the power of the liturgy to transform all believers in the paschal mystery?

Catechesis for the revised *Sacramentary* needs to inform, but it also needs to change people's lives and deepen their eucharistic spirituality; it must be conversion catechesis. Two examples of this can be seen in how we address the Introductory Rites of the Mass and the eucharistic prayer.

INTRODUCTORY RITES OF THE MASS

The *GIRM* explains that the purpose of these rites “is to ensure that the faithful who come together as one *establish communion* and dispose themselves to listen properly to God's word and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily” (*GIRM*, #46; emphasis added). Yet how often are these rites still perceived on the part of many as unimportant or merely something we do until the late comers arrive? Do the faithful see this as truly sacred time?

Catechesis should enable the faithful to understand that through our participation in the actions of the Introductory Rites, something significant happens. We actually take on the form of a community; we become the body of Christ. And when we gather, Christ is present in our midst. Through these actions, we realize the words of Jesus: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” *The Introduction to the Order of Mass (IOM)*, drawing from various sources when doing so, says this is the “first image that the Church gives of herself” (#66).

How well has the formative power of the Introductory Rites taken hold of our lives? Do our communities still suffer from virulent individualism, or have they truly taken on that collective identity and responsibility to which the liturgy calls us? Do we delight in the presence of young and old, rich and poor, the music and language of other cultures at the celebration of the Eucharist? Do we see diversity in the assembly not as an obstacle but as a gift to be treasured and celebrated? Do we really long to gather together every Sunday?

Catechesis for the Introductory Rites needs to go beyond an explanation of structure or what words we will use to respond to the greeting “The Lord be with you.” A true conversion catechesis is ultimately about how we transcend individualism and take on the identity of the body of Christ to become a community, a holy people, who understand the true meaning of public worship and who are transformed to live this through “charity toward brothers and sisters who participate with them...in the same celebration” (*GIRM*, #95).

THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

The *GIRM* describes the eucharistic prayer as “the center and summit of the entire celebration” (#78). This is drawn verbatim from the previous edition of the *GIRM*. In reality, however, catechesis on this prayer has been weak. How many

still perceive this prayer as the private prayer of the priest? How often do people’s eyes glaze over it or only come alert during acclamations? How well is the prayer proclaimed Sunday after Sunday and, even more importantly, how many would miss this prayer if they received Communion during a celebration in the absence of a priest?

Richard McCarron aptly describes the need for catechesis on the eucharistic prayer when he states:

But many still know liturgical assemblies that are but shadows of who they are called to be and celebrations that are slivers of what they could be. Many stand at the brink of the valley and behold dry bones. And when we come to the eucharistic prayer, named the central prayer of the Sunday liturgy, we behold dry bones indeed. The question is put forth: Can these dry bones live? (*The Eucharistic Prayer at Sunday Mass* [Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997], 1.)

Catechesis for the eucharistic prayer should make our “dry bones come alive.” It is appropriate that catechesis address the approved eucharistic prayers for use in the United States, their historical roots and evolution, and even the approved postures for the prayer used in the United States, but our catechesis fails if it does not take us beyond these points.

Through this prayer, the gifts of bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. At the same time, this prayer manifests who we are as a church. Sunday after Sunday we assent to be a people who lift up our hearts to the Lord, who give thanks for all the great things God has done for us in salvation, who sing praise to God with the angels, who ask God to send down the power of the Holy Spirit to transform the gifts of bread and wine and ourselves, who obey the command to “do this in memory of me,” who

remember Christ’s death and resurrection, who unite ourselves with both the living and the dead, and who affirm our belief in all that has been prayed through our “Amen.” This great prayer of praise and thanksgiving, prayed in our name by the priest, not only transforms us but also directs the way we live. Catechesis for the eucharistic prayer opens our eyes to see what it means to be and pray as a eucharistic people.

These are but two examples of the liturgical catechesis on the Mass that are needed if the true spirit of the liturgical reform is to take hold in people’s lives. There are many others. Just imagine how conversion catechesis can address the wonder of God speaking to his people (*GIRM*, #55), our participation in the social mission of the church (*GIRM*, #73); or the implications of our expression of mutual love and reconciliation with one another (*IOM*, #125), to name but a few.

The advent of a new *Sacramentary* provides us with a natural opportunity to deepen the eucharistic spirituality of the faithful, but it is not enough to simply bring people up to date on the new changes; an authentic liturgical catechesis demands a transformation in consciousness or, as the *IOM* states, a formation “unlike any other educational endeavor” (Introduction, xv).

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