



# LITURGICAL CATECHESIS

## A MINISTRY OF SANCTIFYING LITURGICAL CATECHESIS ON THE BOOK OF BLESSINGS

### The Work of Sanctifying

The front page of the March 13, 2006, issue of the *Orlando Sentinel* had a colorful picture of the blessing of the bikes in Daytona, Florida, which took place after the 11:00 am Mass on Sunday. This is an annual tradition at the end of Bike Week. Bikers attired in everything imaginable gather for the blessing of the bikes and to remember those who have died. On the same Sunday, I watched as a lady came up to the priest before Mass and asked for her rosaries to be blessed. She confided that she was a great lover of the rosary and always had several on hand to give away. I watched as Father made a sign of the cross over the rosaries and silently prayed.

In our contemporary world, blessings continue to play a role in our lives. Just Google the word “blessing,” and you will be astounded at the 19,800,000 hits the Internet search engine provides. Many are unaware of the great treasure of blessings we have in the Church, and they are even more unaware of the meaning of “blessing” in our Catholic tradition.

The decree for the *Book of Blessings* reminds us “the celebration of blessings holds a privileged place among all the sacramentals created by the Church for the pastoral benefit of the people of God.” The introduction calls for catechesis beforehand on the meaning and power of blessings in the Church (19).

### Superstition or Genuine Faith?

An authentic catechesis on blessings should begin by addressing the many misleading notions and erroneous beliefs about blessings that continue to persist in the Church. Many still hold a superstitious understanding of blessings that might be reinforced by pastoral practice. The introduction warns against the intrusion into the celebration “of anything that might replace genuine faith with superstition and/or shallow credulity” (19).

One way of combating this is found in the way we celebrate blessings. The *Book of Blessings* calls for the full participation of the faithful in the celebration of a blessing. It states “it is ordinarily not permissible to impart the blessing of any article or place merely through a sign of blessing and without either the word of God or any sort of prayer being

spoken” (27). A number of people are astonished when I mention this directive. Sometimes parish practice regarding blessings is very uneven. On some occasions, the celebration of a blessing includes the participation of the faithful and follows the order provided in the *Book of Blessings*. At other times, especially for a blessing of an article, it is not. Some are quite surprised to learn that the Church has an official Order of Blessing for Religious Articles and for rosaries because they have rarely seen it done.

A priest friend of mine once commented that it would be impossible for him to carry around the *Book of Blessings* and use it every time someone requested a blessing. This point is well taken. One way of coping with this situation is to have on hand the abridged version for use when blessings are celebrated outside of Mass or the Church. The unabridged version provides other pastoral suggestions. For example, in the Order for the Blessing of Rosaries it is recommended that a large number of rosaries be blessed in a celebration that precedes the recitation of the rosary. It also proposes communal celebrations of this blessing for rosaries along with other religious articles on feasts or memorials of Mary (1463–64).

### Liturgical Prayer and Blessings

We also need to strengthen our catechesis on blessings as liturgical prayer. Many are surprised to find out that, blessings “are a part of the liturgy of the Church” (16). In fact, when ordering the reform of sacramentals, the Second Vatican Council decreed that because they are liturgical actions, “special attention should be given to the full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful” and to the elimination of elements that had “obscured the true nature and purpose of sacramentals” (Decree).

When doing catechesis on liturgical prayer, my experience has been that many catechists are able to name Mass, sacraments and Liturgies of the Word as belonging to the liturgical prayer of the Church, but more often than not they leave out blessings.

When the liturgical nature of blessings is emphasized, the danger of superstition is offset. The *Book of Blessings* provides a description of the

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liturgical elements constitutive of a typical blessing. They include:

- Full, conscious and active participation of the faithful
- Beginning and concluding rites
- Proclamation of the word
- Praise of God's good deeds and a petition
- Outward signs and gestures
- A variety of liturgical ministries

Since liturgy is the privileged place for catechesis, the liturgical nature of blessings is best communicated in and through their proper celebration. Careful attention should be given to the elements listed when preparing a blessing celebration. The *Book of Blessings* describes the typical structure of a blessing, highlighting its two essential parts: proclamation of the word of God and praise of God's goodness and petition for his help (20). Catechesis needs to especially dwell on the importance of the word of God and why it is central to the celebration of a blessing to ensure "that the blessing is a genuine sacred sign" (21). Catechesis for the second part of the blessing is also important and needs to inform people about the fundamental nature of blessings.

### **It's Not Just About Me: The Nature of Blessings**

Sometimes our perceptions about liturgy are one-sided. I recently participated in a parish mission on the Eucharist given by a well-known speaker in the field of liturgy. He made an excellent point about the purpose and nature of the eucharistic liturgy. He said, "Remember, it's not about me; it's about giving glory and praise to God." An authentic catechesis needs to deepen the faithful's understanding of this message with regard to blessings. Sometimes we think blessings are just about us or our activities, buildings, and/or objects. Yet the *Book of Blessings* says, "Blessings therefore refer first and foremost to God, whose majesty and goodness they extol and, since they indicate the communication of God's favor, they also involve human beings, whom he governs and in his providence protects" (7).

Catechesis needs to make us aware that the celebration of blessings is centered on glorifying God for his gifts and on imploring favors from him. Catechesis for blessings should cultivate gratitude in people. It needs to foster within us a new posture for how we perceive all of creation as a gift and lead us to "profess that as we make use of what God has created we wish to find him and to love and serve him with all fidelity" (12).

### **The Ministry of Sanctifying**

One means to accomplish a sense of gratitude is to make people aware of the abundance of blessings we have in the Church. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, we learn that there is a blessing for everything under the sun. There is even a blessing for the czar: "May God bless and keep the czar. . . far away from us." Here we discover that there is a blessing for just about everything so that we overlook nothing.

The *Book of Blessings* does just this. We have blessings pertaining to persons, related to building and human activity, of objects, of articles, related to feasts and seasons, and for various needs and occasions. And, in case you have a situation in life not explicitly addressed by a blessing under one of these categories, the Church provides an Order for a Blessing to Be Used in Various Circumstances (chapter 71).

The many forms of blessings established by the Church serve to fulfill its many-sided mission of sanctifying. This sanctifying mission is better served when we make full use of the rich repertoire of blessings. Most are familiar with the Blessing of Animals or the Blessing within Mass on the Anniversary of Marriage. How many are aware of the Order for the Blessing of Parents and an Adopted Child or the Order for the Blessing of Parents after a Miscarriage? How many parishes celebrated the Order for the Blessing of Travelers on occasions of parish trips or during the holiday season? We are all familiar with the Blessing of an Advent Wreath, but do we celebrate the blessings for a manger or a

Christmas tree? The more we celebrate blessings, the more we become aware that almost every event in our lives is made holy by divine grace.

It is exactly for this reason that the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy was authorized to prepare a book of prayers and blessings for use in the home. *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers* (OCP 9717TL) enables households and families, the "little churches," to sanctify every moment of daily life. More importantly, it seeks to create a "bond of prayer" that joins the prayer of the Sunday assembly to the daily prayers of every Catholic" (Foreword). Part I, which contains the daily blessings, provides prayers and blessings for every day of the year and every event of the day from waking to prayers at bedside. Parts II through V provide prayers and blessings for days and seasons, times in life, various times and places, and common prayers.

Catechetical and liturgical leaders would do well to make families aware of this treasure. As the introduction states, the goal of liturgical renewal, which is the full active, and conscious participation of all the baptized, "must wait until the people who assemble for the Sunday liturgy are people who know their part well, know it truly by heart, and know it because they know what it is to praise God, to attend to the Scriptures, to intercede, and to give thanks."

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*Divine Providence Sister Linda L. Gaupin was the associate director of the Secretariat for the Liturgy of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (BCL) from 1991 to 1994 and is director of religious education for the Diocese of Orlando, Florida. She holds a PhD in religious studies from the Catholic University of America.*

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