

## The Challenges for Liturgists of the Future: Pastoral Liturgy

### Introduction

The Magisterium establishes the liturgy of the Church. The Academy analyzes it. Parishes implement it. There is, of course, some overlap: The Magisterium also analyzes its own work; those in the Academy celebrate the liturgy; and in parishes we like to think we ultimately establish what actually happens in the liturgy. This talk is addressed to those in the Academy from an alumnus in the pastoral field, concerning the liturgy we all receive from the Magisterium. This paper will explore some of the challenges posed by pastoral practice, and some needs that the Academy could fulfill. I will focus on three liturgical environments: the Sunday eucharist, the initiation rites, and the social liturgies of weddings and funerals. I will conclude with some thoughts on what parishes need from the Academy, and what the Academy needs from parishes.

### The Sunday eucharist

The different assemblies who gather for Sunday worship use one resource in common, the Roman Missal. As our worshiping communities are diversifying, a single book holds them together. In the pastoral field this supplies pride in the present and hope for future development. Catholics rejoice that the eucharist is celebrated in a similar way all around the world, but they also seek more personal and cultural rituals within the formal structures of the liturgy.

Many parishes and dioceses are becoming more multicultural. The world is more complex, people are increasingly mobile, and communities are more integrated than ever before. This is evident from the evolution of musical styles in parish worship. It is unusual to hear one style of music throughout an entire celebration of the eucharist. Rather, one expects to encounter some chant, some hymns, and some ethnic and folk music. All participants can usually find some music that helps them pray, even though they may not like all the music. The variety of liturgical music exemplifies the range of the Christian faith, which can touch the human heart in any culture and time.

The multicultural world can also be found in styles of preaching, forms of hospitality, art and architecture, vesture and flora, and in the participants. We always reflect the culture to which we belong, amidst the many cultures in which we live.

Even so, there are enclaves where certain styles of worship persist. Some parish communities may be entirely ethnic or not at all. Within a city, one can find a Latin mass, a folk mass, a choir mass, an organ mass, a youth mass, a gospel mass, and a polka mass. People who shop around for their favorite products will also shop for their favorite worship. Personal mobility has rendered parish boundaries porous in many urban and rural areas. Some churches have become “destination parishes” where people will travel past other parishes to find the worship they seek. Although this has fostered the development of identifiable liturgical styles on Sundays,

destination parishes have to work harder on ministries throughout the rest of the week. People may travel a distance on Sundays to worship, but they may not travel the same distance for Wednesday night religious education, Thursday night pastoral council meetings, or Saturday mornings at the food pantry. The relationship between worship and service is more disconnected the further worshipers live from one another. People may find a certain style of liturgy personally comforting, but it is enriched if they join other worshipers to form a community and serve other people throughout the week.

Even in dioceses where the parishes are not so multicultural, it is common to see a presbyterate that is. The shortage of priests has moved many dioceses to reach outside their locale, even outside their nation, to find other priests available to come serve. This poses opportunities for experiencing the global church while staying at home, but it also poses challenges for a local community to retain its identity. An African priest who serves a rural community with no black members may face racial prejudice that he never anticipated. An Asian immigrant who does not speak the local language well may serve people who simply cannot understand him. Such priests preside over a valid celebration of the eucharist, but people may be too focused on innerconversion and oral comprehension to enter the spirit of the liturgy.

Consequently, some parishes are learning to be multicultural not because they changed but because their pastor did. They are seeing a solution to the priest shortage that they never imagined. Parishes losing one priest have always assumed that the bishop would simply send another, but when he doesn't have one to send, the bishop does what they do when they run out of supplies: Go to the store and buy more. In this case, the storehouse of priests is not very local. The arrival of foreign priests can open one's eyes to the universal nature of the Church, but it can also reinforce the commodification of the spiritual life – just as people shop for the parish they want, a bishop will shop for the priests he wants. Unquestionably there are benefits to a multicultural presbyterate and an ethnically different pastor, but the roots of this development grow not so much in the soil of universality, but of expediency, where a local community has not fostered religious vocations and an unequal global economy causes priests of poorer nations to seek out ministries that provide more comfort for themselves, their families, and their dioceses back home. The universal nature of the Roman liturgy permits these trends to succeed.

Tolerance, the virtue that provides a home for multiculturalism, is also on display in relationships with other believers. Catholics often forge strong friendships across the borders of belief. In rural America, where people feel a near equal allegiance to their hometown and their high school football team, the segregation of worshipers on Sundays seems anomalous. Many spontaneously perceive that they share core values and beliefs with their friends of other denominations, and they would welcome the opportunity to worship and share communion with them. This *sensus fidelium* maneuvers comfortably through its own private ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. To many Catholics, the differences among believers are simply not as sharp as the Academy perceives. The disconnection between the theological disputes that

separate Christians and the genuine love that individual Christians hold for one another indicates either that the Academy has failed to convince the people, or the people have developed a more tolerant ecclesiology than the Academy. We need more vigorous research that will pave the way toward common worship.

The tolerance that marks multiculturalism and ecumenism has not been in such abundance in the English-speaking world as churchgoing Catholics await the publication of the third edition of the *Missale Romanum* according to revised guidelines for translation. Other language groups are having their own challenges, but the present English translation veers a little further from the Latin than that of other languages, so the journey for Anglophones from the present to the future is farther than the one most others are taking. Some churchgoers are looking forward to the revised translation, many know nothing about it, and some others are wary. After all, recent newsworthy developments in the liturgy have sparked their own controversy. Statutes for the International Commission on English in the Liturgy have been revised. Conferences of bishops grew weary after 20 years of analyzing translations. The media have created competing narratives of negativity and support. The relationship between ICEL and Vox Clara has been unclear. It is said that 10,000 changes were made to the translation after eleven conferences of bishops approved it, and that some of these changes improved the result, while many of them diminished it. Some conferences of bishops have started implementing the missal. Others will do so in stages. Still others will begin everything at once this Advent. For English-speakers, the third edition of the Roman Missal is the biggest story in the Catholic liturgy since the Second Vatican Council, and it has uncovered a strong love for the liturgy as well as wounds that ache to be healed. How ironic that the communal nature of the eucharistic gathering has been tested by a process that intended to enhance it.

In pastoral liturgy the two spheres that prompt the most discussion on the Roman Missal are history and authority. Many people in our parishes have a rather shallow grasp of liturgical history. They know that the mass has been around for a long time, but to read the description of the eucharist in the time of Justin the Martyr still brings acclamations of astonishment. Few people realize that the dialogue introducing the preface has been around since the fourth century, that the typical collect dates from the sixth to the eighth century, that the private prayers of the priest come from the ninth, the invitation to communion from the fifteenth, and eight out of ten eucharistic prayers were entirely composed after the Second Vatican Council. Catholics treasure the past and have great pride in the present. But many are learning for the first time that how you translate a collect depends on the occasion for which it was composed some 1500 years ago, the emendations it may have undergone after the Second Vatican Council, and the placement of that collect within the structures of the liturgical year today. The postconciliar work that selected and distributed collects throughout the missal has escaped the awareness of many a Catholic.

Consequently, some people rebel against the academia of history. Just because a prayer was used in the eighth century, some are objecting, why should we use it today? Well, some ancient prayers are useful; others are not. But the principles for

selecting these prayers remain as unknown to many Catholics today as they were when the prayers were first rendered in the vernacular languages. A great deal of study has been done on ancient prayers, but little of it has reached the level of pastoral catechesis. There were good pastoral reasons for retaining the ancient prayers we have – their beauty, their poetry, and their ability to express a human condition common from one generation to the next. But few have linked the antiquity of the prayer with its spirituality for the sake of today's parish. If the study of the liturgy focuses too narrowly on textual analysis, it may avoid the very nature of prayer – the spiritual development required of the one who gives it voice. In parishes we face some bewilderment over the value of some treasured prayers, and we need an academic engagement in the texts so objectively thorough and so subjectively prayerful that it reaches the realms of faith and spirituality.

The second sphere of pastoral concern surrounding the Roman Missal is authority. Many people feel that they are voiceless in a project that means everything to them: what they say and hear when they celebrate the eucharist. Now, in truth, they are no more voiceless than they were in 1970 when the first vernacular translations appeared. But the media are savvier now. Technology has advanced. People have inside knowledge of events, and an increased sense of entitlement. The Council affirmed the many gifts of the Spirit within the worshipping assembly, and those have blossomed. People serve in the liturgy in more diverse ways than ever before. Consequently, they have a stronger stake in the liturgy than before. The forthcoming translation would probably be less controverted if it had not been preceded by decisions that confused some churchgoers: the broad permissions to celebrate the preconciliar rite, the removal of responsibilities from communion ministers in the United States to clean vessels, the overlaying of the Divine Mercy devotion onto the liturgies of the Triduum and the Easter Octave, and the still limited practice of offering the faithful communion from the cup in many houses of worship, especially in Europe and Latin America. A revised English translation of the lectionary was not warmly received, and it made some people wonder how good the missal would be if the same people were producing it. All these decisions are defensible, and indeed some of the faithful have welcomed them. But an accurate picture of pastoral liturgy shows that they created worry among some Catholics who felt that the conciliar vision was being misread, and they sowed fears that the very participation in the liturgy trumpeted by the Second Vatican Council was itself being redefined.

There were legitimate concerns about the way some pastoral liturgy was practiced after the Council. This provoked the Vatican to condemn liturgical abuses and to establish new systems of translation to address the quality of the deeds and words that make up the liturgy. Some of these developments have sadly come on the waves of suspicion and distrust. The remedy for misunderstanding is in the hands of members of the Academy, to whom God has given the skills of analysis and perception, the ability to see multiple sides of complex issues. Because we are a Church, all of us should be able to demonstrate a mutual charity that recognizes the

goodness of those who care about the liturgy, invest their lives in it, and yearn for ways to approach God by means of its celebration at the Sunday eucharist.

#### The initiation rites

One of the most satisfying occurrences in family and parish life is the celebration of the rites of initiation. Whether they are combined at the Easter Vigil or observed independently throughout the first years of one's life, these events become occasions for family joy, deeper faith, and community growth.

The postconciliar Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has proven successful in parishes around the world, where the richness of its symbolic structure helps Christians affirm the faith in our hearts and our reliance on ritual to reach divine realities. I'd like to focus on three areas of the initiation rites, baptism by immersion, the meaning of confirmation, and the reception of adults validly baptized in other Christian traditions into the full communion of the Catholic Church.

Baptism by immersion has attracted many of us in pastoral ministry, who have discovered the fullness of its sign. We have long taught that baptism incorporates into the body of Christ, forgives all sin, and reorients our lives; now we are using a symbol to show it. New church constructions and renovations of older buildings have included fonts suitable for immersing adults, and priests have learned the art of baptizing while they too get a bit wet. It is only fitting: there is something contagious about a baptism – like a birth in the family, it brings new life to the person in question, but it affects the lives of everyone else. Academic reflection on the meaning of baptism has affected not only pastoral rituals, but even the architecture of churches and the furnishing of spaces. Baptism is our foundational sacrament, and in parishes we aim to celebrate it that way. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal emphasizes the value of signs in the liturgy, and promotes the choice and arrangement of signs that, “given the circumstances of persons and places, more effectively foster active and full participation and more aptly respond to the spiritual needs of the faithful” (20). Parishes have taken up this idea and put into place perceptible signs that foster spiritual growth. The groundwork for the popularity of baptism by immersion was prepared by academic reflection on what baptism means.

If baptism by immersion tells a story of success between the Academy and pastoral liturgy, the celebration of confirmation affords a less satisfying example. The utter absence of consistent pastoral practice around the world reflects a theology of confirmation in disarray. A sacrament applied to various somewhat related circumstances, confirmation continues to frustrate parents whose teens refuse to attend catechesis, children who think it has everything to do with the bishop, and bishops who enjoy visiting parishes but would prefer to spend their time in a broader exercise of pastoral leadership. Confirm a child of catechetical age at the Easter Vigil, and many parents will wonder how a non-Catholic kid younger than their own can get confirmed, but theirs cannot. The Academy has provided some helpful elucidation, but not enough to effect changes. Parishes struggle to make sense of confirmation, and the best we can do is to reassure parents that the frustration is not their fault.

A less obvious but very real pastoral concern is the reception of baptized Christians into the full communion of the Catholic Church. In many parishes, these candidates are grouped together with catechumens, and the respective ceremonies take place together at the Easter Vigil. The rite for receiving baptized Christians was completely revised after the Second Vatican Council out of ecumenical concerns. To compare the series of rituals for the unbaptized and the rather efficient ceremony for those already baptized is to observe a striking difference in the handling of these groups, based on our theology of baptismal status. However, parishes have blurred this theology by forming groups for the purposes of catechesis, liturgy, and social bonding, which trump the rather stark theological distinction that baptism imposes. The Rite of Election is often populated with validly baptized Christians who approach the local bishop before they may approach the communion table – a practice most definitely outside the vision of the ritual conceived after the Council. In this case, parishes have missed a significant contribution of the liturgical movement – the respect for other Christians that framed the ecumenical movement. Parishes need greater clarity from the Academy, and not just clarity, but enthusiasm for ecumenism, and a persistence to help us share the vision of unity so clearly in the mind of Jesus at the Last Supper.

#### Weddings and funerals

If people are going to appear in church at all in their lives, they will probably come for Christmas and Easter because it is socially acceptable to do so, but many will also consider a church as a venue for their wedding, and, depending on the designs of those they leave behind, the place for a funeral. Priests in pastoral ministry are inconvenienced by funerals, most of which demand hours of our time on just a few days' notice, and also by weddings, the dates of which are known well in advance, but which set up an endless list of requests, all tainted by anxiety. Many priests say, "I would rather do a funeral than a wedding," and although I personally find this philosophy reprehensible, it indicates the exasperation that many priests feel.

The message, unfortunately, has gotten through. Many of us in pastoral ministry are experiencing a decreased demand for weddings, and it should come as no surprise. Many couples seek out a pretty church with a long aisle, something designed for the theatrically visual demands of a wedding. Many couples do not make the connection between their affection for each other and the parish community in which they live, and yet the canon law of the Catholic Church presumes that a bride and a groom are both Catholics and will be married in the parish church of one or the other, the same church in which that person was baptized and has lived their faith-filled life. The absence of any such component requires extra paperwork and levels of bureaucracy for the wedding to proceed. In truth, many couples are sterling examples of the sacramental life, and their spirit of love and service is astonishing. They are truly the sacrament of which Saint Paul speaks, a sign of the selfless love between Christ and the Church.

However, we do get peculiar requests concerning weddings: who participates in the procession, which symbols to use, what music is appropriate, who is invited into

the church that day, and how everyone should dress. Very few couples imagine the wedding within a greater and more imposing liturgical act, the eucharist, which logically guides the wedding ceremony within it. Couples are more likely to think of this wedding as an event in which the church plays a minor though not completely insignificant role – if they contact us at all. For sure, some couples have met resistance from their parishes. We have requirements that seem out of date to them. If they are living together, they may admit that their choice is wrong in the eyes of God, but that belief does not persuade them to separate. The action that will alleviate the situation is a choice many priests resent having to make: we help them get married.

The disconnection between liturgy and marital commitment reminds couples that they have other options for the place of the wedding, so many of them choose to go somewhere else. Those coming to church for a wedding do indeed have some flame of faith in their hearts. This should help purify the celebration of the wedding, but it will also lessen the number of weddings taking place in Catholic churches.

Without submitting to the commodification of weddings that has taken over many corners of the marketplace, we perhaps need to listen more carefully to what couples are saying about the meaning of their love and the reason for gathering their families and friends for this event. A lot of our theology of marriage comes from the biblical and liturgical texts, but couples have an independent though related experience of love and friendship. They have discovered something pure, noble, and eternal in the love they have for each other, and they think the Church is an appropriate place for that to be acknowledged. When we invite couples to choose scripture readings for the service, almost all of them pick the same passage: 1 Corinthians 13, Paul's hymn to love. No other biblical passage better expresses the couple's experience of love. Thank God Paul included that chapter in his book, or who knows what we would hear at weddings? Still, what should alarm us in pastoral ministry is that Paul was not speaking about engaged couples. He was speaking about the Christian community, the first-century equivalent to the parishes in which we work and pray. Couples are finding in their own love the fulfillment of Paul's vision, but they are not finding it in our parishes. They should experience the love Paul describes when they meet with the parish priest and the people. They don't find it there; they find it in their partner.

Relevant to the Academy, no theology about marriage will sound convincing unless the people who teach it, study it, and write about it do so with love. When we follow the two great commandments with such joy that they influence the way we study and write, we will develop a more loving Church, a more loving leadership, a more loving common prayer, and a more loving community whose parish church building will become the most obvious place to celebrate the love of marriage.

The increased popularity of cremation is shifting the pastoral practice of funeral liturgies. Many people are choosing cremation as a less expensive, ecologically sounder way to dispose of their remains. It also provides a more flexible timetable for the celebration of the funeral: Ashes can be kept for the weekend when more people can attend the funeral, or they can be kept till next April when the weather is more

benign. In spite of the Catholic Church's pleadings to the contrary, some families are keeping ashes on the mantle at home, or distributing them over the farm, upon the mountain, or across the sea. We have no way of regulating the distribution of ashes, apart from catechizing about our preferences for the proper disposal of something as sacred as a spent body at the end of human life.

Furthermore, many families choose not to include the Mass of Christian Burial in the final disposition of the remains, or any kind of funeral rite at all. The Catholic funeral rite has power to move people through their grief. It provides a structure over the chaos that consumes the loss of someone you love, with a caring, hope-filled ritual. Still, many of us in pastoral ministry are experiencing fewer funeral rites, partly because the mourners have not made the eucharist a part of their week.

With both funerals and weddings, the concern extends beyond these rituals. If our typical Sunday celebration were meeting the needs of our people, they would logically want their weddings and funerals in parish churches. But we have not fully developed these connections.

The Academy could help us by reaching into social sciences to learn more why our rituals do and do not connect with worshipers. More than studying the ceremonies of the past that have endured to the present, we also need more study of the communities that developed them. This is difficult because we have an enviable library of liturgical books and papers that supply an endless source of study, but not as much evidence about the people who compiled and kept them. We need better understanding of the culture, how these texts addressed the needs of the times, and what parallels we might find today. This would provide a great service to those of us in pastoral ministry who know what the Catholic liturgy can do for our people, but we don't always understand how or why it works.

#### What parishes need from the academy

As an institution dedicated to liturgical study looks to its future, I hope it keeps one eye on the needs of parishes. The word "academic" is sometimes used to mean "out of touch" or "impractical", yet the Academy can provide the solid foundation upon which pastoral liturgy can build – if it sets that foundation in a helpful location.

What do parishes need? We need clearer explanations of why things are the way they are, how we got the liturgy we celebrate, and the reasons why some practices changed and others were retained. We need scholars who can communicate these reasons in clear language made persuasive by logical argument.

Our greatest need in parishes is a lively, intentional celebration of the Sunday eucharist. We need provocative homilies and excellent music. We need liturgical study that will give weight to what a homilist says and an example of effective communication. We need study that will elucidate the role of music, presented in such an engaging way that professional musicians who do not step forward to help in parishes will feel compelled to do so. The development of homilies and music is



sometimes frustrated by the inability of the Church to keep up with ever more professional forms of communication.

We need a sufficient number of priests to provide the eucharist in every parish church each Sunday around the world. Could the Academy help us address the shortage of priests? Could it help the Church face this difficult question with courage and creativity, founded in solid research and dispassionate inquiry? Could the Academy cut through the emotions that accompany the question with logical and thought-provoking research?

We also need especially from the liturgical academy, an unwavering allegiance to the liturgy. Devotional practices are not contrary to the liturgy, but they are not the liturgy, and we sometimes need help developing the liturgical spirituality of our people.

For our multicultural society, we would appreciate reflection not just on the texts, but why they came about and what affect they may have had on those who first prayed them. Even to know the range of possibilities would help bring a text off the page and into the community that formed it and used it. Who were these people? What were their concerns? How did their faith influence their actions, not just their prayers? Such research would help us respond to the concerns of people today who wonder if an ancient text still fits modern needs, and which additional modern needs might be prompting the Church to compose new texts.

We could also use some theological reflection on the uses of technology. St. Peter's Square has introduced big screens for papal celebrations. Should we be imitating these in our parishes? Is video projection a natural outgrowth of our adoption of microphones and electric lights, which replace acoustically sound buildings and the play of candlelight? If so, then what does this say about the incarnational theology that has made the Catholic Church one of the greenest assemblages of believers around, encountering God in bread and wine, water and ash, palm branch and olive oil, perfume, bare feet, the phases of the moon, the rising of the sun, the music of the human voice, and the hallowed place of pipe organs? Is there a theology of technology that would help develop our liturgies? Would there be fewer concerns over the printed translation of the third edition of the missal if we used electronic readers instead of hardbound books? Is the controversy over the missal ultimately homage to the printing press? What if we got updates to the translation as frequently as our hard drives downloaded updates to their software? How might that change the authority within the church and the prayer of the people of God?

#### What the Academy needs from parishes

The Academy could benefit from the parish perspective of the people of God. Come participate one time in a mass at a typical parish church, and you will experience firsthand why it is so hard to get people to make a weekly commitment to Sunday mass. But come and worship with us for a year or more, and you will discover why we are still there. There is more to the liturgy than a single celebration of the

**Sunday eucharist. Liturgy needs a stable community of people to give it life and depth. Come and pray over the din of crying babies and squawking cell phones, the mispronounced words of the lector and the wrong notes on the organ, the homily that does not quite reach the people, but people who overlook all this in order to worship together and to approach the communion table, which gives orientation and purpose to their lives. The Academy may learn that God is present in the foibles of humanity, in good intentions, even where professionalism is lacking.**

**Catholics bring meaning to the celebration of the liturgy – the struggles in their lives, the reality of their love, the grief of their loss, and the fear of their foes. The average churchgoer is a fine theologian who has wrestled with the purpose of life and still keeps coming back. The Academy could learn from the lived experience of Catholics for whom the Sunday liturgy is the source and summit of a life that isn't so liturgical the other days of the week.**

**The Academy needs the parish's quirky way of thinking about liturgy. The grassroots have developed the quasi-liturgical observance of marking stages in catechetical formation, first communion ceremonies, the unity candle at weddings, and the enshrinement of cremated remains. Sometimes popular piety suggests ritual expression that liturgical documents do not foresee.**

**Parishes could also teach the Academy about ecumenism. Many Catholics are ready to see the results of ecumenical study. We've been waiting a long time for the Academy to catch up with the instincts we feel and the unity that does exist.**

**Parishes too stand between memory and prophecy. Catholics love their church because the people who catechized them created deep memories of God and the power of liturgical prayer. They care about this Church so much that they want to pass it on to the next generation. But they need help. We need prophets. We need scholars trained not just in the past, but in the study of the present, and in the projection of the future. What questions will trouble people tomorrow? How can we prepare now the research that will help the next generation be faithful to Christ and the Church? How can a liturgy that was flexible enough to withstand twenty centuries of evolution adjust again to meet the needs yet to be?**

**We need scholars who can study the past, but who also listen to the human heart today, scholars who have personally experienced the love of God and who share it with others, scholars whose commitment to common prayer is steady, and scholars who know what it is to be human today, an individual loved by God, yet part of a community that tolerates differences, progresses in technology, and advances on the path toward redemption. It will take prophetic, courageous, committed, and faith-filled scholars to make pastoral liturgy flourish.**

**Il Pontificio Istituto Liturgico: Tra memoria e profezia  
9<sup>th</sup> congress, 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary**