

Celebrating Liturgy

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INTRODUCTION

I am immensely grateful to you for the invitation to this national conference of the Australian Catechumenate Network. Your country has produced fine scholars in every field, but especially in Roman Catholic theology, liturgy and Christian initiation. As a member of Societas Liturgica, I've come to meet a number of Aussie colleagues, and I have been unfailingly impressed with their knowledge of good liturgy, pastoral application, and friendship. I feel honored to address you this weekend, and hungry to learn from you. You always demonstrate commitment to Christ, love for the Church, awareness of the real world, and skills at worship.

First, let me explain where I'm from. This is the United States of America. It's located a bit northeast of here. Or northwest, depending on how you go. I'm from Kansas City, right in the middle of the 48 contiguous states. There are two Kansas Cities - one in Missouri and the other in Kansas. I am from Missouri. Kansas City, Missouri, has the airport, the football team, the baseball team, the symphony, the opera, the ballet, the zoo, and the tall buildings. Kansas City, Kansas, has a view of Kansas City, Missouri. Even people in the US don't understand this, so I am frequently introduced as coming from Kansas. I don't. I'm a Missouri boy.

The reason Kansas City exists pertains to commerce. The Missouri River starts in the northwest, dips south, and takes a sharp bend east. That's where Kansas City is. Years ago, if you lived in the Eastern part of the US, you could go by boat through the Ohio River into the Mississippi River and then to the Missouri River. But if you then wanted to go to west, you had to get out of your boat, put your goods into a covered wagon, and take the trails. One of those trails is called Santa Fe because of the city in New Mexico where it led. The very name of that trail tells you that the people who settled our region had more on their minds than spreading their goods; they also wanted to spread their faith.

As do we. I've been asked to explore three themes with you, the first of which is liturgy; specifically, why liturgy is key to the process of Christian initiation. Tomorrow I'll speak about ministry, and on Sunday about mission. That is, I'll look through a catechumenal lens at service within the Church, and then the call to evangelize outside the Church.

Prompting today's topic about liturgy is a concern raised by your conference planning committee: Is the 21st century person capable of true liturgical participation? Do we even need a liturgical mindset, and how might this be relevant in our modern culture? I could rephrase it this way: "Do people today have the skill to focus at worship when their lives are fragmented by multitasking? Are they capable of it?" My answer is a resounding yes, they can do it. But to get to that answer I need to explore what is expected of worshipers,

and why the catechumenate relies on liturgical rites to prepare everyone for discipleship.

EXPECTATIONS

What does the liturgy expect of worshipers? The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy answered this question with one word: participation. And not in a halfhearted manner. It called for "full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations" (14), to which people have both a right and an obligation. Participation demands involvement and concentration, yet many people aren't involved and don't concentrate very well.

Vatican II's beautiful summons to participation was not entirely new, and the church has always counterbalanced with it a concern about whether people were capable of concentration. This concern was first expressed long before the advent of mobile phones. Pope Pius X first encouraged participation in 1910 with *Tra le sollecitudini*, and Pope Pius XI expanded the concept for the International Congress on Pastoral Liturgy in 1926. He wrote that the faithful at mass are acting "not as mere passive recipients of the graces flowing over them, but cooperating in these graces with all their will and strength, and, above all, participating in the liturgical offices, or at least following their performance with fervor." Even more to the point in 1947, Pope Pius XII cautioned further about the challenges of worship; he wrote in *Mediator Dei* that people should participate in the liturgy "not in an inert and negligent fashion, giving way to distractions and day-dreaming, but with such earnestness and concentration that they may be united as closely as possible with the High Priest, according to the Apostle, 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.' [Phil 2:5] And together with Him and through Him let them make their oblation, and in union with Him let them offer up themselves."

Just ten years ago the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments under the direction of Cardinal Francis Arinze echoed this theme in its instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, where it says, "The participation of the lay faithful too in the Eucharist and in the other celebrations of the Church's rites cannot be equated with mere presence, and still less with a passive one, but is rather to be regarded as a true exercise of faith and of the baptismal dignity."

As you know, Catholics are held to a Sunday obligation; what you may not realize is how that obligation is explained in canon 1274 of the Code of Canon Law: "On Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass." They're not obliged to go to mass. That's not enough. The Sunday obligation kicks in after we get there: We are obliged to participate.

Participation involves both actions and intentions. It implies the actions of making responses, singing songs, assuming postures and making gestures. But it also implies an intention behind these actions. Some people visibly participate, but they lack inner concentration. From time to time, we all fall into this formalism, even we priests. It's been a problem all along. Jesus mournfully cited Isaiah: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from

me” (Mt 15:8). We sometimes go through the motions without adding our heart. On the other hand, some people pray very intently at mass, but they do not join in the actions of worship. They don’t make responses. They won’t sing. They won’t receive communion from the cup when it is offered. They’re praying, but you may not know it by looking at them. Full, conscious, active participation demands joining actions and intentions. When that happens, people are fully engaged as individuals. Their behavior encourages others to participate as well.

Joining actions with intentions requires concentration. For example, during the Liturgy of the Word, people are supposed to listen because each reading is a proclamation of the Word of God. You hear the voice of the reader, but God is speaking to the people right now; you hear the voice of the deacon or the priest, but Christ is speaking his gospel right now. Many people read along from a screen or participation aid because it takes too much concentration simply to listen. But if you can train a congregation to give full attention to a skilled reader, something marvelous happens in the church. You experience the voice of God through the communal participation of listening.

Similarly, whenever the priest is offering a prayer, everyone should pay attention to the words. When the priest says, “Let us pray,” he really means business. We often fill those few moments of silence with something else - servers bring up the book, the priest turns the pages, people cough, some take off their coats. It is sometimes hard to achieve silence in the room, but if everybody works at it, you can obtain the full participation of people concentrating on their prayer.

Through the long eucharistic prayer, this is especially demanding. However, if people understand its structure, they can usually follow it. It starts with thanksgiving, and it concludes with intercessions. In the middle is not only the institution narrative with its words of consecration, but also the offering of the sacrifice. The eucharistic prayer is not a time to wait, text, or daydream. It demands the full attention of everyone in the room.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal says this about the Eucharistic Prayer: “the meaning of this Prayer is that the whole congregation of the faithful joins with Christ in confessing the great deeds of God and in the offering of Sacrifice. The Eucharistic Prayer requires that everybody listens to it with reverence and in silence” (78).

Participation not only requires concentration, it also demands education. Otherwise people may concentrate very hard on the wrong thing.

Here’s what I mean: Many Catholics have a practical approach to the mass. They are coming primarily to receive communion. They sit through the Liturgy of the Word in hopes of hearing a decent homily, and they complain if they do not get one. They meekly contribute to the collection. They patiently wait through the eucharistic prayer, paying attention to the moments when the priest shows the consecrated host and chalice to the community. Then they receive communion, and it really doesn’t matter to them if they receive from the altar or from the tabernacle because they get the Body of Christ either way.

However, the liturgy makes a direct link between offering and communion. This makes the mass different from a communion service. At a communion service there is no sacrifice. But at mass, there is. It is the sacrifice of Christ in which we participate sacramentally, but it is also the sacrifice that each of us makes, the offering of ourselves on the altar together with the offering of Christ. That is why the priest says, "Pray... that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable." We know that the sacrifice of Christ will be acceptable to the Father. The question is will we be acceptable? We each have a stake in this offering. During the preparation of the gifts, the priest may incense the bread and the wine on top of the altar, and a deacon or server may incense the people. In a sense, we are all on that altar together with the bread and the wine. The aromatic smoke surrounds us in the hopes that each of us will be an acceptable offering to God.

The bread and wine are also symbols of the offering that each of us is making. After they are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, we are to share communion from that offering on this altar. We are really not supposed to receive communion from the tabernacle, which represents the sacrifices of a different congregation. Receiving communion from the tabernacle circumvents the whole motion of the offering. For the people who receive communion that way, mass has become a communion service for them. They came for holy communion, and they got it. But they have missed the link between the offering they make together with Jesus Christ, and the communion they share as its fruit.

So there are two different views of what participation is. A common view is that you come to mass to adore the real presence of Christ at the consecration and to receive communion - wherever it comes from. The view that emerges from the liturgy is richer: You come to mass to render praise and to offer your life to God together with Jesus Christ, whose sacrifice on the cross is present to us at this altar; from this altar we share in his body and blood. At stake is not only the integrity of the mass itself, but what is expected of Christians. The mass does not simply call us through adoration to an interior spiritual peace; it calls us through sacrifice into external apostolic service; God transforms our sacrifice and grants us nourishment to serve. Without that focus on participation, we lack the disposition to evangelize. We are more content to worship in private than to reach to our neighbor in public.

Elements of the way we celebrate the liturgy conflict with this second vision of participation. For example,

- * People avoid the front seats. They can adore very well from a distance. However, every person has a primary role to play in the action of the mass. Where you sit makes a difference. In an ideal parish, people come early to get a front pew, not a back seat.

- * Many ministers passing in front of the tabernacle during mass genuflect to it or bow to it, but the rubrics disagree. Ministers in motion should instead make a low bow to the altar. Once mass is underway, the tabernacle has nothing to do with the action; the altar is the center of the sacrifice. But people used to receiving communion from the tabernacle conclude that it must be central to the

celebration. It's not. The more we throw attention to the tabernacle during the course of the mass, the less people will appreciate the demands of the sacrifice we have placed upon the altar.

* On occasions like school masses and funerals, the procession of the gifts is sometimes amplified with articles representing the interests of students and of the deceased. But whatever is brought up in the procession is meant to be given away in sacrifice. If you're taking the textbooks back after a school mass, then I'd like to take my contribution envelope back too, thank you very much. If the textbooks are being given away to another school or a library, then fine. That procession sets the table for the sacrifice we are making. If we confuse the purpose of the procession, people will not grasp the expectation that they should be sacrificing themselves.

* Priests have a hard time concentrating especially when we concelebrate. If we are just along for the ride, not really responsible for all the action, we divert ourselves by talking with one another during the ceremony, or waving at friends and acquaintances while in procession. Concentration is hard work. No matter who we are, each of us owes attention to the entire liturgy, even when we are silent.

* Probably the single most neglected rubric of the entire liturgical renewal is paragraph 85 from the General Instruction: "It is most desirable that the faithful, just as the Priest himself is bound to do, receive the Lord's Body from hosts consecrated at the same Mass and that, in the cases where this is foreseen, they partake of the chalice (cf. no. 283), so that even by means of the signs Communion may stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated." It is hard to catechize catechumens in this eucharistic theology when so many Catholics still have a more devotional idea about their participation at mass.

CAPABILITIES

Even if we catechize well about what we're doing when we gather for the eucharist, even if we make some changes in the liturgy that invite a deeper participation at mass, the question remains: In the twenty-first century, is this possible? Can people concentrate on the words, actions and meaning of the mass? I truly believe they can. Helping catechumens do it is part of our responsibility. We need to equip them with the tools for prayer.

People have these skills, but not everyone uses them. We can refine the skills of concentration every day - even in forms of entertainment. Take movies, for example. People who go to the cinema are setting aside a communal time and place to concentrate on a visual story. Some people, though, will text, update social media, or make phone calls during the film. Others rent the movie so they can do other things while it's on. But many like to immerse themselves at the cinema.

Among the arts, music demands attention. Songs that become popular last only a few minutes each. But a symphony can last about 40 minutes or more. The best-known musical phrase in world history lasts only a few seconds. It is

enshrined in the title of Matthew Guerrieri's book, *The First Four Notes*. Without my telling you anything else about this book, you know exactly which four musical notes are the most famous in history, don't you? Everyone can da-da-da-dum the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, but not everyone has sat quietly to listen to the entire work - either a recording or a live performance. Yet most people who give their full attention to an entire symphony will come up from the experience feeling moved and refreshed.

The visual arts work differently. You can stand in front of a painting or sculpture and determine yourself if you will stay there one minute or one hour. But live music makes you listen from start to stop, and when it's over, it's all gone but the memory.

You will experience the beauty of concentration if you spend two hours attending a play, or three hours at a sporting event. Even if you spend one hour doing a crossword puzzle, playing a video game, eating out, watching a child, looking at a fireplace, or walking along the shore, you know the beauty of concentration. Nearly anyone can do it, and has done it, but not everyone wants to do it. When people come for the liturgy, the best way to hold their attention is to invite their full, conscious, active participation. They can do it for an hour, in spite of the temptation to multitask in the pew.

Can catechumens learn this? I think they can. Even children can learn the value of silence and prayer. They just need coaching and experience.

LITURGY IN THE RCIA

Several comments in the RCIA indicate the goal of liturgical formation for catechumens. For example, it says that during the precatechumenate, a priest "should help those taking part in it with prayers suited to them" (RCIA 40), as though they are not yet ready for common prayer with Christians. It also says one reason that prayer services are held for catechumens is "to prepare them gradually to enter the worship assembly of the entire community" (RCIA 82/4) The RCIA presumes that catechumens do not yet have the tools for communal prayer; they have to learn these before being absorbed into the assembly. This partly explains the dismissal of catechumens. They leave not just because the liturgy of the eucharist should be kept secret. They leave because they are not equipped to do everything that Christians are expected to do at mass.

Do you remember what we used to call the two parts of the mass prior to the Second Vatican Council? The mass of the catechumens and the mass of the faithful. We used those terms for centuries when we had no catechumens, and now that we have catechumens, we don't use those terms any more. (In fact, "Liturgy of the Word" and "Liturgy of the Eucharist" are far more expressive titles.) But you can hear what those old terms implied. Catechumens would come for the word, the backbone of their instruction. After that, you needed baptism in order to accomplish everything else: the recitation of the creed, which is a kind of renewal of baptismal promises; participation in the prayer "of the faithful," which is an exercise of the baptismal priesthood; the offering of oneself upon the altar and joining the priest in the eucharistic prayer, which are also actions of the

priesthood of the faithful; reciting the Lord's Prayer, during which those who are baptized, children of God by adoption, call upon our "Father"; sharing the sign of peace, which is a postbaptismal sign of unity; and holy communion, which binds us to one another and to Christ. Even the dismissal sends the baptized forth into their mission. All these actions throughout the second half of the mass presume that those who perform them have been baptized.

These actions also demand certain skills. So while we are preparing for the liturgical rites of the RCIA, it would also be worthwhile to coach catechumens in the skills needed for worship.

- * They need experience with prayer, in private, at home with the family, and with others at church.

- * They should sing. At RCIA sessions, people could begin to learn what the whole community sings, and to grow at ease singing with others.

- * They can practice how to listen. They can close their eyes and open their ears when a scripture is proclaimed. When they hear a prayer without following the printed words, they could share thoughts about what stirred their heart.

- * They can work with others. The eucharistic assembly is not an aggregate of people individually wired to a common God, but the People of God voicing their prayer and sharing actions together.

- * They can practice sacrifice. Most everybody already does. Anyone who has fallen in love has sacrificed for the other person. Anyone who loves a job or a hobby - sports, music, education, whatever it is - has said no to other things to become good at what they love. When we worship we express our willingness to say no to other allurements, and yes to God in Jesus Christ.

- * They can eat and drink. Catechumens already know what goes into preparing a meal and cleaning up afterward. A single meal requires the contributions of many people. Catechumens should also know the enjoyment that comes from eating and drinking in the company of others to celebrate common values, challenges and achievements.

- * They can talk about processions. They may reflect on the times they stand in line. Most people don't like to stand in line. They'd rather be doing something else. But when we stand in line, it's usually because something really is more important than anything else right now. It takes patience, and it heightens anticipation.

- * They can practice discernment. In the scriptures and the homily, even in the songs they sing and the prayers they say, catechumens will open their hearts to whatever God asks. People take that kind of openness into an annual performance review at work, or when processing the setbacks and opportunities that change the direction of one's life. If catechumens practice discernment, they will practice the liturgy.

- * They can attend events such as theatre, sports, or concerts. They will learn how to applaud, laugh, shout, and keep silence with others.

* They may reflect on architecture, the way rooms are designed. Certain things happen at home that shouldn't take place at the office; actions that belong in the bedroom should not take place in the kitchen. In church the gathering space, the music area, the nave and the sanctuary all have different purposes.

* They can reflect on furnishings. At home Dad may have his seat at the dining room table; Mom may have her chair in the living room. Sometimes the dining room table itself is reserved for food and nothing more.

* They can experience nature - bread, wine, water, oil, candles, palms, and ashes. People could reflect on how well they take advantage of the outdoors, the times and rhythms of the seasons in the calendar year.

All of these can build skills we use at Catholic worship, and catechumens may find them helpful in developing a sense of prayer.

Twenty-first century humans have the same physical and mental capabilities as first century humans. Even though the media move us quickly from one visual image to the next, as if we can concentrate no longer, we can. Even though people multitask, they are really doing just one thing at a time; we have to put something on hold while we do something else. This too is a form of sacrifice. The longest liturgy comprises short segments. I've heard pastors boast that they can complete the entire Easter Vigil in 90 minutes. Well, OK, but that's not the idea. The length of the Easter Vigil is one of its symbols. If you have trained people well in the skills for liturgy, they can enjoy a long mass. If they spend three hours at a sporting event, three hours at the shopping mall, three hours at the hairdresser's, three hours at a business lunch, three hours playing video games, they can spend three hours at church for the single most important liturgical event of the year.

That being said, it is worth remembering Jesus' advice about liturgy: "In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words" (Matthew 6:7). Then he teaches the disciples how they should pray. We all know and love Matthew's account of the Lord's Prayer; however, a different version appears in Luke's Gospel. It's shorter. Scholars argue that Luke's version is probably more original because it's easier to explain why Matthew added a few words to Jesus' prayer than to explain why Luke omitted them. The prayer Jesus taught may have been even shorter than the one we use today. Still, in spite of this advice to the disciples, we know from other passages that Jesus could spend an entire night in prayer (Luke 6:12). He tried to get Peter, James and John to join him for that enterprise in the Garden of Gethsemane, but they became drowsy instead. Let's hope they at least rattled off the Lord's Prayer before dozing off. What offended Jesus most about prayer was formalism. Some people just go through the motions. They don't really mean the things they say. This is where we need to lead catechumens, and we need to lead by example.

Is a liturgical mindset relevant today? Liturgy is key to Christian formation because God has something to say to us, and we have the responsibility to listen.

At the background of this discussion of twenty-first century liturgy is this question: Why do we pray? It's a little like asking, why do we communicate? Well, it is satisfying to say what we think to someone else. But communication achieves a bigger purpose. It builds relationships. Communicating is always better than not communicating; and praying is better than not praying.

We should not presume that catechumens understand how important this is. Before speaking to them of liturgy, we speak to them about God, about themselves, and about communication through prayer. You might also ask them, "How do you typically spend your Sunday?" Is it a day of work or play? A day with colleagues or with family? A day of solitude or a day of communion? A day of recovery or a day of prayer? How likely, you could ask a catechumen, how likely is it that Sunday worship will be part of your life after baptism? What evidence do you have right now about this priority?

The letter R of RCIA stands for Rite, and the book is a collection of rites: acceptance into the order of catechumens, anointing with oil, blessing and exorcism, dismissal and election, scrutiny and presentation, preparation and initiation. They each are filled with beautiful words and symbols. But before we can properly engage catechumens in any of them, they need to become familiar with the role of liturgical prayer in their lives. When they get it, when they get its beauty, they will experience the power of the liturgy. It can transform their own self-understanding, their association with Christians, and their relationship with God.