

# A Transparent Liturgy

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Which person exasperates you more when you go to church? A priest or musician whose dominant personality resembles a loud television celebrity? Or a priest or musician whose recessive style renders their leadership inaccessible?

Good leadership in the liturgy aims to be engaging without drawing too much or too little attention. It should be warm. Not hot. Not cold. Good leaders are so transparent that the people of God see Christ.

Every Catholic has opinions about a preferred leadership style. If you are a priest or a musician, you have opinions about how your peers exercise the same craft.

And, believe me, lots of people have opinions about you.

Whether you are a priest or a cantor, your words at liturgy can be separated into two principal categories - the ones you improvise and the ones you are given. They each require attention.

You may use your own words at different moments of a typical liturgy: The cantor invites people to sing the hymns and chants. After the greeting the priest or another minister may introduce the liturgy. The third form of the penitential act and the universal prayer may be composed locally, though many churchgoers hear versions published elsewhere. The priest or deacon almost always crafts his own homily, and each parish by necessity determines which announcements to make near the end of mass. The preparation for these varies considerably. Some people improvise the words on the spot. Others speak from notes. Still others use words prepared by a professional service. A few write a complete script for every “improvised” word of the mass. These are the moments in which the leader’s personality risks coming on too strong or receding beyond reach. In general, I recommend writing a script for every word you say, but reading it in a manner that sounds fresh. Having the words in front of you will help you shape clear sentences and manage the number of words. It will also help you to express your thoughts respectfully and to keep your personality on a leash.

Models for the introduction to a liturgy can be found in several places. For example, the pages of the missal pertaining to Palm Sunday give the priest a brief address in which he invites the active participation of the people. So do the pages pertaining to the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord (February 2). The priest may use those or similar words, but the proposed introduction suggests how he could prepare one for other celebrations.

Interesting examples of introductions can also be found in the revised Order of Celebrating Matrimony. The presider has always had liberty to introduce the wedding liturgy after the greeting, as he does at any mass, but an official sample wedding introduction now appears for the first time in English. The presider may choose from two options, or he may completely replace these by

using his own words. One option is addressed to the couple; the other to the congregation. Both explain the nature of the ceremony and invite participation. Both are brief. In practice, though, some presiders make a longer introduction, especially for the sake of those who may be unfamiliar with Catholic ceremonies. His may give instructions on postures, responses, music, photography, cell phones, location of restrooms, and the rules governing communion. The samples in the Order of Celebrating Matrimony reject that kind of content in favor of catechesis and invitation. If practical information needs to be communicated, it could be shared some other way - in a program prepared for the wedding, or in announcements made by the cantor or another minister just before the ceremony begins. A presider feel that his improvised introduction puts people at ease, but he may also confuse them about his role. He may be drawing too much attention to himself when he could be focusing everyone's attention on Christ.

At any mass with music, the cantor's voice will likely be the first that everyone hears. Some cantors merely offer basic information: "Please stand and turn to number 35 for the opening hymn." A dry announcement may actually impede participation rather than enliven it.

Most congregations do not need instructions about changes in posture. At weddings and funerals, perhaps. But normally at a Sunday mass, people know very well when to stand. Sometimes the first words people hear are a command to change posture, as though they were adolescents. Simple courtesy leads the cantor to say other words first: "Good morning, everyone! Welcome to St. Anthony Catholic Church." Then, the cantor may turn attention to the song: Please join in singing our opening hymn, number 35."

Some cantors add more. "Today is the Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time." But this is excessive information that slows down the introduction and does little to engage people. Most will not be inspired by the slow progress of Ordinary Time. Better might be something like this: "Let us acclaim God together with number 35, 'Praise to the Lord.'" That gives people a reason to sing.

If you are concerned about cellular devices and want to include an announcement, remember to be polite: "Just a reminder to silence your phones so that you and others can enter more deeply into prayer." Many people still won't do it. They think to themselves, "Aw, my phone won't ring." Then it does.

Another approach, somewhat sneaky, is this: "If you have a device that accesses the internet, I invite you to take it out now and look up our parish web site, [309benton.com](http://309benton.com). I'll give you a moment to find it. If you need to see the readings for today in English or in Spanish, you may click on the links. Now please set your phones to silent mode and turn your hymnal to number 35." Such an announcement encourages people to put the phone in their hands for something useful, making it easier for them to shut off the sound.

When you have an opportunity to say something in your own words, give them careful thought before the liturgy begins. Say only what is necessary, be engaging, and then get out of the way.

## A Transparent Liturgy - GIA Quarterly

At other times of the mass, you are saying words that have been given to you, whether you are singing the verses of the responsorial psalm or proclaiming the collect. Especially here, strive for transparency.

When a priest is offering prayers from the missal, for example, he will express them best if he makes them sound as though they are coming from his own heart. He will need to read them slowly and carefully, phrase by phrase, to let the people absorb their meaning. This will help him step aside, and let the people's prayers ascend to God. After saying the words, "Let us pray," the silence is important. During that time the priest and the people recall the prayers most on their minds. The priest then "collects" them all in the collect. When the priest has placed himself in God's presence in that silence, he will more authentically follow it with a sincerely spoken prayer.

Singers, too, when they are given words to chant, should concentrate on the text even more than on the notes. If singing the responsorial, the cantor who understands why this psalm was chosen for this mass will sing with clarity and gather the faithful more effectively into prayer. It is hard to concentrate. Minds will wander. Presiders and singers alike experience this. But when our heads entertain unwelcome thoughts about tasks to be done and food to be prepared, the sacred words can gently pull us back into our own prayer, which helps us lead the praying of others.

What we don't say also matters. During the course of the mass, some priests give verbal instructions to servers, check signals with the deacon, or catch the attention of a sacristan. It is far better to tend these matters outside the liturgy so that the priest may enter it more purposefully. Not giving extraneous instructions during mass lends more weight to the words we do say.

Some choir members chat with one another during the course of the mass. Some concelebrants do the same. But these conversations pull these ministers outside their responsibility to participate fully, consciously and actively in the liturgy. Participating at mass requires full concentration, even and especially when someone else is speaking. By not chatting, prayerful participation shows respect for all the others who have gathered for worship.

Not announcing hymns is another strategy. Most parishes have someone announce the hymn in order to move people to sing. However, a few congregations have people who are happy to sing, and who do not require encouragement. Placing the numbers on a hymn board or screen may suffice. Not announcing hymns will reduce the words spoken at a mass, letting the more important words shine.

At weddings, when the moment arrives for the couple to exchange their consent, many presiders feed them their lines phrase by phrase. However, the Order of Celebrating Matrimony has never suggested this. In fact, the post-Vatican II marriage ceremony took some steps to move the presider out of the center of action by giving more words to the bride and groom. Many presiders still recite the words of consent so that the couple will not make a mistake, but they could also read the words themselves out of the ritual book or from a

## A Transparent Liturgy - GIA Quarterly

prepared card. This emphasizes their role as ministers, and the presider's role as witness. His silence keeps him transparent so that the couple's voices are heard. If the groom wears a wireless microphone, it will pick up the couple's voices - not the presider's - when the assembly most needs to hear them.

All microphones, however, should be silenced when they are not in use. This pertains not only to the groom, but more generally to musicians and presiders. A priest who wears a wireless microphone will cause distractions if he leaves it on throughout the celebration. He probably does not need to speak the entire creed into the microphone, for example. Usually the voice of the congregation coheres without him. The same applies to his singing. Some priests enjoy singing and do it rather well, but if the microphone is on, his voice will overpower that of the assembly. Shutting off the microphone will help his voice disappear into the common voice of the people of God.

Good cantors exercise special vigilance over the microphone. By using the microphone, the cantor can help people find a page and start singing. The microphone also excels when the cantor functions as a soloist, singing verses of the responsorial, for example. But when the community is singing together, they probably don't need a cantor at a microphone. Ideally, the organ or other instruments lead their singing, not a solo voice. In our culture, a singer with a microphone signals a time to listen, not to sing along. Some live performers, when they want their fans to sing a refrain at a concert, actually point the microphone away from their mouths and toward the fans. Aurally this accomplishes very little, but visually the pointed microphone indicates, "It's your turn now." When a cantor uses a microphone to sing music that belongs to everyone else, people may be thinking, "I don't have a microphone; she does, so I'll listen to her." Cantors may be drawing excessive attention to themselves in the very moment that their transparency would help people sing.

To be a good liturgical leader, participate consciously in the entire celebration of the mass. For example, when the readings are being proclaimed, everyone will sense their importance if even the ministers are paying full attention. When the priest offers the eucharistic prayer, everyone else prays along, including the choir. Too many presiders look disinterested if something is happening that does not involve their leadership, such as singing a hymn. Too often the musicians see nonmusical parts of the mass as a time for a break to visit with those nearby, check email, rearrange the music, or tune an instrument - all oblivious to the negative impact these actions have on other worshipers.

Most photographers at weddings want to follow the local rules - partly because they don't want to be scolded during the ceremony, and partly because they want to get invited back. At our parish we prepare a handout for photographers so that they know what we expect. We also invite them to pray along with us. I don't presume that every photographer will be a model of transparent participation, but I think that they should know the ideal.

When I serve as an organist, I plan when to get on and off the bench. I don't want to create a visual or aural distraction. I want people to know that I am

## A Transparent Liturgy - GIA Quarterly

**engaged in the other parts of the mass. If the pipe organ's blower is loud, I shut it off when the organ is not in use. Even the organ can be transparent.**

**Musicians will foster participation by modeling it, especially when they are visible to the rest of the assembly. If people know from the ministers that everything demands attention at mass, they will more likely pray. They will more likely sing.**

**We go to church for inspiration, not exasperation. Transparent liturgical leadership takes place when everyone concentrates on the words and actions, dismisses mental distractions, and engages personally in full, conscious and active participation.**

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