

# Looking Ahead

## National Biennial Liturgy Conference, Parramatta 2020

### Liturgy: Forming a Prayerful and Eucharistic Church

Paul Turner, 14 March 2020

#### Introduction

Grateful for the past, we look ahead with hope, indeed with confidence. The Holy Spirit who has guided our church thus far will not abandon us in the years to come. The treasures of eternity lie open to those who discover Christ, and we are his ambassadors. As we remain open to the Spirit, we hunger for the insights that will help us minister as God wills.

In this talk, I will address three areas: the diminished attendance at Sunday mass, the challenges of secular society, and ideas for a way forward. Our church faces hard realities, but we have great potential. The message of Jesus Christ continues to echo in our hearts. We hold it dear and share his good news with others.

#### Mass Attendance

When any organization starts to fail, this item will appear on its agenda at each meeting: “How can we get more members?” I get nervous whenever I hear that question. It’s as if the group is on life support and saying, “How can we get more oxygen?” In reality, there may not be new members because the purpose of the organization no longer meets the needs of society. It only meets the needs of the current members; they have invested years of their lives in its continuance. Often the few people who remain have forged strong friendships, mourned the death of other members, and accepted new responsibilities when diminishing numbers placed extra demands on those who remained. The organization may have completed its original purpose. It may have become something else: a source of identity for those who belong.

That bleak picture may describe an organization in your parish or in your home town. But I refuse to believe that it describes the eucharist. I’m not blind. I know that the number of those attending mass has diminished. But the basic formula we offer still bears fruit for the salvation of the world. To take an extreme example, when some priests travel, they celebrate mass privately because they do not have ready access to a church or have not secured the required permissions to preside in another diocese. Some bishops celebrate mass privately when they have no public mass. Even when a priest celebrates with a single minister assisting, the fruits of the mass apply. This is not the ideal. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says, “liturgical services pertain to the whole Body of the Church. They manifest it, and have effects upon it” (26). I’m not advocating tiny congregations, but the ministry of the Church continues even when only a few people show up. We wouldn’t have monasteries if we did not believe in the power of the prayer of the few.

There are noteworthy times when mass attendance increases. On days of national disaster or personal catastrophe, people go to church. In the United

States in the days after September 11, 2001, when Americans suffered an attack on our homeland, church attendance spiked for a couple of weeks afterward. People needed to gather, and church was one of the few public venues where they could. We discovered that we perform a societal function where people may assemble in grief and hope, feeling less isolated.

Parenthetically, we discovered something different in Kansas City last month when the Chiefs, our football team, won the Super Bowl for the first time in fifty years. Some people went to church before the game, offering their supplications, and we decorated the church that morning with red and gold flowers, the colors of our team. After the victory some parishes published a meme on Facebook giving mass times to entice those who made a bargain with God before the kickoff. Civic celebration after the event erupted in the streets downtown, complete with a parade of the conquering heroes. For civic celebration, people gather in the streets. But for civic disaster, people go to church.

The coronavirus is turning this principle on end. At the very moment of crisis when people may return to prayer for deliverance, they are discouraged from joining large assemblies. The city of San Francisco, California, has asked people to avoid inessential large gatherings, but the authorities there deem worship essential and encourage people to participate.

In the year 2001, after 9-11, many church decorating committees wanted to display the American flag more prominently. In some parishes, permission was denied on the opinion that nationalism would distract from the centrality of the eucharist. In my parish, I agreed to feature the flag because church helps people identify their sources of unity. I suspected that after a few months, fears would subside, attendance would decrease, and the decorating committee would move the flag where it was before. All of that happened.

Less precipitously, people also come to church in greater numbers for certain annual occasions, such as Christmas and Easter, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, even Mothers' Day. Many people understand the religious significance that underlies days that have become as much holidays as holy days. Even if they are marginally religious, they may want to include prayer on those days, just as they might wear their sports' team's colors on the day of a major game. They may not wear those colors every day, even though they identify themselves as supporters of their team every day.

Weddings and funerals may also draw people to church. However, in my years as a pastor, it seems that those numbers have decreased as well. It used to be a given that a Catholic would marry a Catholic, and the wedding would take place in a Catholic church. It used to be a given that a deceased Catholic would have funeral rites inside a Catholic church. These practices have changed. They still happen, but in fewer numbers.

Many families regard baptism as a social and spiritual event. Many parents who have welcomed a new child to their home sense their responsibility to raise that child appropriately. Many of them want the church involved. Some parents opt against baptism because they want their child to determine which faith to follow. They do not let the child choose which parents will take care of them, what food the child should eat, or what citizenship the child may claim. But church membership feels more expendable to some

parents, perhaps because they have not fully confessed the faith themselves, or they feel that their parents curtailed their freedoms, and they could express themselves now in this way.

Still, the Catholic Church encourages the baptism of infants within the first few weeks after birth, even in cases where the parents' participation in church life may fall short. The Order of Baptism of Children says, "If there is no hope whatever that the child will be brought up in the Catholic religion, the Baptism is to be delayed according to the prescripts of particular law (cf. no. 25), after the parents have been advised of the reason" (8/3). Baptism is never completely denied; it may be "delayed", and only when there is "no hope whatever" of raising the child Catholic. If there is some hope, the baptism need not be delayed.

People who attend the Catholic Church's liturgies on occasion cannot do it unless someone is there regularly. Our regular participation provides a place where others can go in times of need. Rather than take offense at their behavior, we could affirm their search for meaning. Small congregations face financial hardships that limit their buildings and services. But they continue to praise God and sustain sacred spaces where others can pose their questions and longings. Our participation even in small congregations serves God, the universal church, and local seekers.

### **The Challenges of Secular Society**

Secular society has marginalized much of what the church has on offer. Even some Catholics no longer use the services of our church. Take marriage, for example. People can get married in other ways, and many of them do. They may even ask non-ordained friends to conduct civil ceremonies. Increasingly it appears that what we mean by marriage and what society means by marriage are two different things. For example, pre-nuptial agreements practically announce that the commitment to a lifelong union comes with an asterisk. Many couples consider divorce and remarriage acceptable future choices.

Yet every engaged couple I meet comes to the church because they have faith, they have encountered the mystery of love, they see the connection between love and eternity in their commitment to each other and their belief in God. They want the support of the church especially in a culture that holds other values. If they don't believe those things, they aren't coming to church for their weddings. Rather than berate those who make other choices about marriage, we rejoice that our message still resonates in the hearts of many thoughtful Catholics. We need not compromise our wedding ceremonies to make them more marketable. They already connect in profound ways. The dignity and beauty of the Catholic liturgy lends dignity and beauty to marriage.

For funerals secular society also drifts from traditional Catholic practice. Just as human beings naturally feel a desire for love, we all face the specter of death. Death is the central mystery that drives religious belief. Traditionally, the Catholic Church has approached funerals as a time for intercession. We admit that we are all sinners, so we pray that God will forgive the sins of the one who has died.

This belief has changed both within and outside the church. Within the church people often offer upbeat condolences: "I'm sorry about your loss, but

I know your loved one is in a better place.” You’ll even hear it in funeral homilies: “I’m sure that Evelyn is now again in the arms of her husband.” The prayers of the funeral liturgy are never that confident; they pray instead for the forgiveness of Evelyn’s sins. We offer consolation through our faith in eternal life. However, our confidence that God has already positively judged the deceased feeds a culture that winks at sin, shores up any semblance of goodness, and acknowledges past blessings rather than future concerns.

Consequently, the services that our liturgy calls “funerals” or “masses of the dead”, are rebranded “celebrations of life.” They look back in gratitude, not forward in fear. There is some beauty to this; we are the pro-life church that values every human birth. The end of life is a time to give thanks. But a traditional Catholic funeral does more. It acknowledges goodness while admitting sin. It rejoices in human achievement but relies on divine salvation. Some of the aversion to Catholic funerals is a theological point. Some people feel that the deceased has done enough by living a full life, and the intercession of the church feels irrelevant. In an age of self-promotion, the message of failure wins few endorsements. Yet we are saints and sinners, each one of us. The Catholic funeral liturgy is honest in that regard.

Confession provides another example of liturgy struggling for footing in contemporary culture. In confession we enter the powerful dialogue between sin and grace and rejoice in the conquest by grace. Catholics hold widely scattered opinions about this sacrament. Some have given up on it entirely for reasons that range from the unacceptable attitude of one confessor to a belief that they haven’t really done anything all that bad. Others use the sacrament every few days for reasons that range from scrupulosity over peccadillos and the accompanying fear of God’s punishment to a genuine appreciation of the grace of the sacrament and the accompanying desire to experience it repeatedly. In the middle, some approach the sacrament in their annual preparation for Christmas and Easter, or at moments of spiritual need.

Underlying these approaches is lack of consensus over the gravity of sins. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, “Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent” (1857), citing Pope Saint John Paul II. Still, even there, one finds great disparity, especially in what constitutes grave matter. Throughout all these differences, the liturgy of the Catholic Church continues to offer solace and direction. When celebrated well, whether in private or in common, the sacrament of penance acknowledges the imperfections that each of us carries and the grace of God who loves us and lifts us even when we fail.

The role of women in the church’s liturgy will be debated for years to come. Participants at the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region shared strong hopes, including the ordination of women to the diaconate. Pope Francis has not accepted this request, nor even one that seems less controversial: the admission of women into the instituted ministries of lector and acolyte, currently still reserved for men. A bishop presides over the institution of these ministers, usually only for seminarians on their way to priesthood or lay men preparing for the diaconate. In a world where women have achieved many strong leadership roles, though gender equality is not yet achieved even in society, the comparisons to progress perceived in the

Catholic Church have been stark. Pope Francis has started to change some of this by including more women as consultors to the Vatican congregations, and in one case appointing seven women as voting members of the congregation that serves those in religious life. Progress has been slow and controversial, but Pope Francis wrote in his exhortation *Christ Is Alive*, “a living Church can react by being attentive to the legitimate claims of those women who seek greater justice and equality. A living Church can look back on history and acknowledge a fair share of male authoritarianism, domination, various forms of enslavement, abuse and sexist violence. With this outlook, [the Church] can support the call to respect women’s rights, and offer convinced support for greater reciprocity between males and females” (42). Who knows where such dreams will lead? But the Catholic liturgy will be ready to follow.

The sex abuse crisis has brought the Church to its knees before a culture that abhors hypocrisy. Our repentance needs to echo for generations to come. Many have understandably turned away from the church as a locus of morality and effective prayer. Our leaders have shouldered the difficult task of guiding the church through these dark days to support the victims and survivors of abuse and to strengthen measures to evaluate those who aspire to shepherd the flock. We hope that future generations will look back on this one as people who faced the horror of sin, leaders who confessed it publicly and who listened to survivors to craft a way forward. The attributes of holiness and respect may once again define the Church of God.

The Catholic Church’s liturgy is ever in dialogue with the culture. At its best, culture has influenced how we gather, build, sing, communicate, and celebrate. The church will stand as a prophetic beacon for the culture, challenging all humans to rise to their capabilities, allow God to dwell within them, discern moral choices, and encounter their maker through the mystery of death.

## **A Way Forward: Fostering and Forming the People of God at Prayer**

### **Pope Francis**

Just a year ago the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments held its first plenary session in many years, gathering its voting members from around the world. Pope Francis addressed the group, praising the work of the Second Vatican Council 50 years earlier, notably the revised calendar, missal, and ritual books for baptism, weddings and funerals produced in 1969. He said, “They were the first steps of a journey, to be continued with wise constancy.” He continued, “We know that it is not enough to change the liturgical books to improve the quality of the liturgy. To do this alone would be a deception. For life to be truly a praise pleasing to God, it is indeed necessary to change the heart.” He called for “unity and variety” as expressions of ecclesial communion. He then zeroed in on his topic, which was also the theme of the plenary: liturgical formation. The pope said, “the liturgy is life that forms, not an idea to be learned.... Reality is more important than the idea.” He also asked the consultants to avoid “sterile ideological polarizations.”

Pope Francis said, “starting perhaps from the desire to react to some insecurities in the current context, we risk then falling back into a past that no

longer exists or of escaping into a presumed future. The starting point is instead to recognize the reality of the sacred liturgy, a living treasure that can not be reduced to tastes, recipes and currents, but which should be welcomed with docility and promoted with love, as irreplaceable nourishment for the organic growth of the People of God. The liturgy is not ‘the field of do-it-yourself’, but the epiphany of ecclesial communion. Therefore, ‘we’, and not ‘I’, resounds in prayers and gestures; the real community, not the ideal subject. When we look back to nostalgic past tendencies or wish to impose them again, there is the risk of placing the part before the whole, the ‘I’ before the People of God, the abstract before the concrete, ideology before communion and, fundamentally, the worldly before the spiritual.”

One more quote from Pope Francis’s address to the plenary session of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments last year: “Speaking of liturgical formation in the People of God means first and foremost being aware of the indispensable role the liturgy holds in the Church and for the Church. And then, concretely helping the People of God to interiorize better the prayer of the Church, to love it as an experience of encounter with the Lord and with brothers who, in the light of this, rediscover its content and observe its rites.”

The liturgy itself forms; the liturgy itself is the real where formation will happen. Still, we offer formation outside the liturgy. Parishes know the challenge of offering any catechetical formation, be it liturgical, spiritual, or moral. People do not flock to churches on a weekday to learn about their faith. We struggle to find the right models for faith formation. Gathering on site remains the ideal, but there are other options: online platforms, shared reading assignments, and chat rooms, to name a few. The difficulty of achieving formation should not deter us from offering it. What works in one parish may not work in another. Each parish pursues its own gifts to form people for liturgical prayer.

### Homilies

Homilies are the storm center of formation. They provide the best opportunity for spiritual growth but rank among the most criticized parts of Catholic life. Thoughtful Catholics, hungry for spiritual nourishment, regularly complain about the tedious length and weak content of preaching. They regularly hear effective communication in advertising and politics. The homily is a rare moment in anyone’s week when a substantial number of people will leave their homes, gather for worship, and sit quietly to listen to a fellow human being’s thoughts. Yet we do it at church. To participate as active listeners in a homily is to value the communication of ideas, to humble oneself with formation, and to join a communal spiritual search.

Almost every preacher believes he is doing a fine job. He deserves praise for the time he spends in prayer and preparation, his daily ministry that puts words into actions, and the courage to speak his faith in public. But many Catholics find the results disappointing. Various initiatives try to improve preaching, but in spite of its importance for the faithful, post-ordination homily formation is scarce. Perhaps some candidates advancing toward ordination just do not have the gift to preach well, though they possess other gifts. If you limited your rugby team to men who pledged years of academic study,

obedience to a superior, and chastity for life, you will find players with those gifts who lack some of the most basic skills you otherwise need to win a game. A good team requires players with specialties. Everyone brings some talent. Sometimes we preachers are the last to know our inadequacies. We mean well, but we also develop strong egos that resist criticism, change and growth. Something in our formation, something in our ministry has to adjust to make us more pliant toward improving our much-needed skills for preaching.

### **The Catechumenate**

We are expecting in a few years a revised English translation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Its appearance will help us review our practices. So far it looks as though the biggest changes for Australia will be an adjustment in some of the vocabulary and a reordering of the material in parts of the book. However, it is still too early to know if even that much will be true.

As the lectionary for mass was one of the greatest achievements of the liturgical renewal, the same can be said for adult initiation. The revised ceremonies have reawakened parishes through a life-giving process of formation and celebration. Catholics never before engaged in adult faith formation now joyfully converse with people about what matters to them the most, helping them make a decision that affects all other decisions. The RCIA has introduced the entire parish to the process of initiation, and its upcoming revised translation should inspire us again.

Two pastoral concerns worth pondering even now pertain to the precatechumenate and the reception of baptized Christians into the full communion of the Catholic Church. We have too readily presumed that baptized candidates require the same formation as the unbaptized. It can be said that the RCIA itself makes the false assumption that those who are unbaptized lack Christian faith, and that those who have been baptized possess it. We all know unbaptized people who call themselves Christians, and baptized Catholics who know little about Christ. The actual Rite of Reception of Baptized Christians into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church encompasses liturgy, catechesis and ecumenical respect. Those who have practiced Christianity faithfully in other denominations may be received into the Catholic Church one by one, preferably at a parish mass on any Sunday of the year, with no preliminary rites.

In practice, though, many parishes require of baptized candidates the same formation as the unbaptized in order to complete an academic-year course in Catholicism and to bond into a group. The Rite of Reception envisions it a different way: Christians may receive formation in a group of other seekers, but they may spin into the believing community as soon as they and the parish leaders perceive their readiness. The framers of this rite never intended to mix baptized candidates with the elect at the Easter Vigil, nor to have their formation delayed beyond what was necessary. In the future we could design formation for baptized candidates that accommodates the needs of the unbaptized, rather than the other way around. Easter sets the date for the initiation of catechumens, not candidates. A rethought process shows greater respect for the spiritual journey of those who already follow Christ, while it gives particular care to those who have not yet committed to him through the waters of baptism.

The other concern is the precatechumenate. The RCIA conceived it as a time when those who have no knowledge of Jesus Christ are evangelized; that is, they come to a first encounter with him and the gospel. As it happens, many of the unbaptized who join our catechumenate groups already know Christ and the scriptures, and are comfortable in their fundamental belief in God. They need not spend much time in the precatechumenate, but some of our parishes fill this time with a syllabus that pertains to the catechumenate: “Who is Mary? Who are the saints? What is confession? Let’s tour the church,” and so on. The questions proper to the precatechumenate are different: “Who is God? Who is Christ? What difference does belief make in life?” We owe these questions to all seekers, regardless of their baptismal status. The answers will sort out those who need a longer precatechumenate from those who do not.

Key to the precatechumenate is the responsibility of every Catholic to evangelize. Many Catholics resist evangelizing: That’s for other churches. We let people discover us on their own and await their email when they do. But it would benefit us all to become evangelizers, especially when we meet new neighbors. When you tell people about local stores and streets, let them know about your church. When people wonder why you have made a certain moral choice, let them know your faith in Christ. Yes, the Catholic Church is controversial right now; yes, we have to swallow the embarrassment of scandal. But Christ is Christ, yesterday, today and forever. He is controversial in a different way, a challenging way, a life-giving way. If you want to love your neighbor, tell your neighbor about Christ. Remember, RCIA is not the Rite of Catholic Initiation of Adults; it’s the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. It brings people to Christ. Our Catholic Church will serve as their vehicle, but the goal, yesterday, today and forever, is Christ.

### Personal Prayer

Our desire to evangelize results naturally from personal prayer. Some people pray to seek refuge from the world. Some striving to overcome their sins think that the fundamental problem is insufficient prayer. Possibly. But it could also be insufficient action after prayer. Private prayer is not an aim in itself; it prepares for common prayer and personal action, including evangelization.

The Mass is built this way. Mass does not conclude with a final prayer. Mass concludes with a command from the deacon: Go forth. It comes from the deacon, the minister who has given other directions in the service. He lists the intentions that need our prayer because, from his charitable deeds, he knows what those intentions should be. The deacon commands the sign of peace, making visible our communion before we approach the communion table. The deacon proclaims the gospel, which guides our actions every day. On Good Friday the deacon instructs us when to kneel and stand. And at the end of every mass, he commands us to go forth - not just to leave the building, but to go forth into the world. Not just to pray privately, but to evangelize. The very word “mass” comes from the deacon’s dismissal *Ite missa est*. “Go, that’s the mass.” The mass implies not just coming, but going, going forth with a purpose.

Popular devotions became less popular after the Second Vatican Council because participation in the liturgy came to the fore. When I attended



the preconciliar mass as a child, we said private prayers during mass: We held a hand missal or prayer book. Some people prayed a rosary. It was all reverent and devout. After the council, we paid more attention to the liturgy. This change gave birth to the famous advice, “Don’t pray at mass. Pray the mass.” Devotions became less popular. Fewer people knew the rosary, attended benediction or participated in stations of the cross. But they were praying the mass, participating at a level never before achieved.

Fifty years later we are experiencing a rebirth in some of these devotions, especially periods of adoration during exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. Eucharistic Worship Outside Mass is not just a devotion; it is one of our liturgies. Mass may occasionally conclude with exposition. Its growth today may be related to the persistence of the preconciliar mass, since both promote meditation on the real presence of Christ.

The upsurge in eucharistic devotion has especially invigorated the faith of young Catholics. They like meditating on the mystery of God, the coming of Jesus in time, and the enduring sacramental presence of the risen Christ. Adoration escapes from a screen-fueled life of multitasking and creates momentary distances from the people that social media want to call your friends. The omnipresence of screens has also fed the pornography industry, which has made exploitative images easily accessible to those who seek to pleasure themselves in a world of anxiety. Eucharistic adoration more positively attracts those who seek time away from screens and moral strength when they return. Periodic adoration may signify the success of full, conscious, active participation by the faithful. People are so busy at mass singing hymns, responding to dialogues, taking common postures, and listening intently to the readings, the homily and the prayers that they may seek another form of prayer where they do not quite have so much work to do. This is fine as long as eucharistic adoration leads one back to the eucharist, which alone remains the source and summit of the spiritual life.

If you are concerned about falling mass attendance, promote personal prayer. Surveys have shown that people who make weekly mass a priority have also made daily prayer a priority. If you wish to increase mass attendance, encourage people to pray at home every day. The more you equip them for that service, the more they will participate in the Sunday service.

### **Eucharistic Theology**

People participate well at mass, but we can always do better. One American prelate held that the single greatest obstacle to fully appreciating the postconciliar mass is offering communion from the tabernacle. That alone has limited the fullest participation to the priest and those few who receive communion from the sacrifice actually being celebrated. By using the tabernacle for communion at every mass, priests have given an unbalanced liturgical formation. They have taught there is no effective difference between the tabernacle and the altar, and people have learned to expect communion from the tabernacle. This dangerously unbalances devotion to the reserved sacrament away from participation in the mass. This may explain why many Catholics want the tabernacle in a central location. After all, that is the place from which they receive their communion. Putting a tabernacle to the side

would make it seem that their communion is unimportant. But unimportant is the priestly people receiving communion from the tabernacle.

The revised English translation of the missal clarified much of our eucharistic theology, though it has received some well deserved criticism. The process stirred up a battleground that revealed how many stakeholders we have every time we gather for worship. It showed how important the eucharist is in the lives of Catholics, which is a good thing. I do some work for the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, and in the last couple of years I have witnessed the bishops of ICEL re-engaging the translation process. Both they and the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments grasp that improvements can be made, and efforts are underway to provide better translations in the liturgical books to come. Some benefits are already evident in the Order of Baptism of Children. More should come to light in some lesser known liturgical books such as the Order of Holy Communion and Eucharistic Worship Outside of Mass and the forthcoming blockbusters, the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults and the Liturgy of the Hours. Not everyone will be pleased with the results, but the bishops have taken seriously the challenge to provide prayers that are more readily understood and more easily prayed.

Two benefits from the retranslation of the missal were increased biblical allusions and theological depth. ICEL wants to preserve those benefits while enhancing proclaimability and keeping a uniform style. In the meantime, people can benefit from studying the prayers we have, especially the collects and prefaces, as sources for meditation and spiritual growth. Even a reflection on the rubrics can provide deeper insights into our liturgical theology.

Several years ago when the revised General Instruction on the Roman Missal appeared, Liturgy Training Publications asked me to write a short commentary on it. I said no because I feared it would bog me down answering questions about rubrics for the rest of my life. Later, I agreed to do it, and, indeed, I've been dealing with rubrics ever since. But I have learned that in my presiding and in my writing if I give the rubrics a chance, they will reveal a theological depth I had not previously appreciated. I came to learn that the people working on the revisions at the time of the council were specialists of great faith with a common vision. To go back to their work and see how it came to fruition has opened my eyes and filled me with great appreciation for the people they were, the scholarship they brought, and the eucharistic devotion they fostered. My usual advice to people about good liturgy is, "Trust the rubrics." They are there for a reason. To steer a path between those on the left and the right of the rubrics, I advise two principles: Do what it says. Don't do what it doesn't say. Most everyone agrees on the first principle, but people find the second principle hard to accept. Everyone does something different from what the rubrics say. But the more we cohere our thoughts and actions to their principles, the more we will discover the true spirit of Vatican II, especially its love for the participation of the people.

This influences how we each participate every day and every year. Every day, if we are to participate fully in communion, we participate fully in sacrifice. When offering the actions of our week to God at the mass, we pray that God will find these sacrifices acceptable. When we prepare children for first

communion, are we preparing them for their first sacrifice? They are not just receiving; they are offering themselves to God when they arrive for mass.

Every year we plunge into the mysteries of God in the Easter Triduum. Our annual observance of the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper, Passion of Good Friday and the Easter Vigil is the apex of our spiritual lives. This three-day retreat forms the spiritual heart of every Catholic's life. Those who do not participate in the Triduum are missing the core of Catholic spirituality. It will take generations to make this a priority, but we can proclaim a consistent message.

Every liturgy is by nature inculturated by actions and words, gestures and song. Becoming more attentive to such expressions requires sensitivity to the cultures of others and skill to incorporate them. Music is one area where progress can be easily achieved, as are the symbols and traditions of various peoples.

The way forward will include better homilies, an evangelism-based catechumenate, personal prayer, communion from the altar, concentration at mass, formation by the liturgy, a spirit of sacrifice, a devotion to the Paschal Triduum, and better inculturation.

### **Forming a Prayerful and Eucharistic Church**

As you prepare for the plenary council, you will be talking about this topic among others: Forming a Prayerful and Eucharistic Church. I think these points may help you.

\* Tell people about Christ. Remember 1 Peter 3:15: "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope." That is a blueprint for evangelization. You have faith, and that faith gives you hope. Your hope will be visible to all who encounter you. Be ready to talk about Christ.

\* Develop your personal prayer. You are all busy. Prayer is not something you do when you have time for it. Everything else is what you do when you have time for it. Choose a method: Lectio divina, Liturgy of the hours, the rosary, devotional prayer books, silence. You cannot foster a prayerful church if you are not a prayerful member of the church.

\* Learn about the liturgy. Our liturgy richly expresses traditional Christian faith. One cannot expect to appreciate it all at once. Read about it, talk about it, reflect on it. Use the prayers and readings of the liturgy in other events during the week and see how they nourish all ministry.

\* Participate fully, consciously and actively in the liturgy. At church, give the liturgy all you can. Arrive early. Turn off your cellular devices. Sing the songs. Make the responses. Focus your mind on everything that is happening, including the parts when you do not speak. Pay special attention to the eucharistic prayer. Receive communion. Do not leave early: Stay for the end of mass. The Second Vatican Council gave you this gift of participation. Use it.

The biblical passage you have chosen as the heart of this plenary is Luke 24:30-31: "When they were at table, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened and they recognised

**him.” Let us open our eyes. Let us recognize Christ among us. He will take us like bread, bless us, break us and give us to the world. He will form us into a prayerful and eucharistic church that always looks ahead.**