

Liturgy in Action

2021 Orlando Liturgical Conference

Now that we have explored “Claiming our Baptism,” let’s return to the first part of the conference theme, “Liturgy in Action.” The revisions to the Catholic Mass after the Second Vatican Council sprung from an understanding that all the baptized are members of the People of God, that all of us are a royal priesthood, and that we therefore have rights and obligations. In this talk I’ll walk you through parts of the Mass that provide opportunities for this. I hope to give you greater clarity on what is expected of you at Mass and to inspire you to enter the celebration more deeply.

I begin with three preliminary concepts: rubrics, intentionality and style. The rubrics are the instructions for Mass that come from the missal. Most of them concern the priest, but many rubrics concern the people. I give the people the same advice I give to priests: “Do what it says; don’t do what it doesn’t say.” Doing what it says is relatively easy, but restraining yourself from doing what it does not say is extremely hard. Almost every priest introduces something into rubrics that just isn’t there. But everyone will participate better by following what’s in the books and avoiding what’s not.

Intentionality is one of the most important ways to participate at Mass as a royal priesthood. Full, conscious, active participation implies meaning every little thing you say and do. It is hard in our society where visual and aural stimuli come fast and furious every day. In any typical hour of the day, we multitask. However, certain hours demand concentration: listening to a full Beethoven symphony, watching a movie, or listening to a lecture. The hour we spend at Mass likewise demands concentration. It is hard, and some people really struggle with it, even among us priests. Some worshipers in areas outside the sanctuary dismiss this value, sometimes deliberately: Ushers in the back of the church who pay scant attention to the prayers and readings; musicians in the choir loft who busy themselves with musical scores during the homily; servers who chat with each other when they think no one is looking; worshipers in the pews who check their cellular devices, respond to emails, send text messages and answer phone calls throughout the service. All of that diminishes intentionality at Mass. If you can eliminate the distractions, focus on the presence of God, and participate in what is happening minute by minute in the Mass, you will create within you a sacred space. How is this possible? Do things and say things with intentionality. Whether you change your posture or respond to a dialogue, avoid doing it as a habit: do it with intention.

Style results from our personality. Some priests are less formal than others. The same is true of deacons, servers and readers. Even our pews brim with extremes of extroverts and introverts. Those with ministerial roles are responsible for the rhythm of the Mass: All should know their cues, when to move, when to speak, when to keep silent and when to sing. Some personal style

is unavoidable and appropriate, but it always serves a greater good, the worshiping of all.

These three concepts—rubrics, intentionality and style—will help priests who are ordained and all the priestly people to put liturgy into action. Here are examples of some parts of the Mass where these principles apply.

Arriving: Don't be late for Mass. Some Catholics still think it's enough to experience what the pre-Vatican II church called the three principal parts of the Mass: the offertory, the consecration, and the communion. The revised rubrics and canon law never say that. All of us are expected to participate at Mass—like, all of it. If a priest who intends to concelebrate shows up late, the rubrics actually forbid him to vest. He's supposed to slink into a pew. Better is for everyone to arrive early enough to greet other members of the community. You are not a priestly individual. You are a priestly people. Some people go to Mass and sit somewhere off by themselves because they want to be left alone. But Mass is a community activity. You will serve others by showing signs of welcome and charity, and you will prepare better for your own celebration of the liturgy.

Bows and genuflections: The rules governing such gestures say that you genuflect only to the tabernacle, and you bow to the altar. Bows to the tabernacle belong before Mass begins and after Mass ends. If the tabernacle is in the sanctuary, the General instruction of the Roman Missal says that the ministers genuflect to it “when they approach the altar” at the beginning of Mass “and when they depart from it” at the end of Mass, “but not during the celebration of Mass itself” (274). During Mass a low bow is made to the altar by all who pass by it or enter or leave the sanctuary. Every Catholic should develop intentionality with regard to bows and genuflections. When you enter a church, you genuflect to the tabernacle; most do it just before they enter the pew, but not everyone realizes what that genuflection is for. It shows reverence to the real presence of Christ. If you are entering a chapel where there is no tabernacle, then you do not genuflect because the Blessed Sacrament is not there. The proper reverence then is to make a low bow to the altar.

Many Catholics confuse these gestures especially at communion time. Just last weekend I put a ciborium in the hands of an extraordinary minister of holy communion who promptly turned toward the tabernacle and bowed. I also gave communion in the mouth to two visitors who each swallowed the host, took a step to the side and genuflected to the tabernacle. I wanted to ask all of them, “What do you think I just put into your hands and into your mouth?” I'm sure people mean to show respect, but they act as if they do not believe that they just received the real presence of Christ, and that something more important than communion is in the tabernacle. During the course of the Mass, even if the tabernacle is right behind the altar, the rubrics ask us not to genuflect to it. Something important is happening, and it happens on the altar, in your hand, and in your mouth.

The opening hymn: Sing the opening hymn. If you are a member of the priestly people, participation at Mass is your right and obligation. Whether or not

you want to sing, it is your job. At the very least, listen to the number that the cantor gives, pick up the hymnal, and open it to the right page. Follow the words. They may have something to say to you. People who do not participate in the opening hymn are breaking down the cohesion of the priestly people; they look as though they have abandoned the people who are singing. They send a message to those on the fence about picking up a hymnal that praising God in song isn't all that important. Everyone, please, participate in the opening hymn.

The collect. When the priest says, "Let us pray," he means just that. Here's how the General Instruction describes it: "Next the Priest calls upon the people to pray and everybody, together with the Priest, observes a brief silence so that they may become aware of being in God's presence and may call to mind their intentions. Then the Priest pronounces the prayer usually called the 'Collect' and through which the character of the celebration finds expression." First of all, the priest is supposed to allow time for silence after he says, "Let us pray." If he does not, you may show him paragraph 54 of the General Instruction. The silence has two purposes: one is to become aware of being in God's presence, and the second is to call to mind one's intentions. This is the priestly people at work. They need time in silence to achieve these ends. In the collect, the priest collects the intentions of the people, but he needs the people to call to mind their intentions at the beginning of Mass so that he can collect them. When the priest says, "Let us pray," all are expected to do just that.

The readings. Those who read are to read with intentionality. If they study the readings before Mass, they will come to a deep understanding of them. It helps to study all the readings, so that readers know how their reading fits into the whole. In Ordinary Time the first reading always has some connection to the gospel. The second reading of Ordinary Time connects more to the second readings of last week and next week. Readers should find these connections so they know how to read. Scripture study can aid every reader. If a parish offers bible study, readers would appropriately be the first ones to register for it—or to lead it.

A reader does not merely read; a reader proclaims. A reader conveys the sense of the reading to the people who are listening. Sadly, almost every reader reads too fast. A slower reading, marked by appropriate pauses between sections, helps people absorb what they hear. A lot of people follow the readings on their cellular device, but that is not the best way to participate fully, consciously and actively. Better is to pray over the readings before you get to Mass. Then open your ears, not your app. Here's the reason: The proclamation of the reading is God speaking to you. It is God speaking his Word to you right now. God's voice is in the sound, not in the device. When the deacon concludes with the words, "The gospel of the Lord," you respond, "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ." You're not talking to the deacon; you're not talking to your device. You are talking to Christ who just spoke his gospel to you. He spoke to you; you speak to him. You want him to listen when you speak? Then listen when he speaks. Be intentional in listening and responding.

The universal prayer. The Mass immediately prior to the Second Vatican Council had no prayer of the faithful, so when the modern liturgy recaptured something that the ancients had practiced, the missal offered an explanation to help people appreciate why this was so important: “In the Universal Prayer or Prayer of the Faithful, the people respond in some sense to the Word of God which they have received in faith and, exercising the office of their baptismal Priesthood, offer prayers to God for the salvation of all” (GIRM 69). Those petitions may not seem like much to you, but through them the liturgical renewal underscored the royal priesthood of the people of God. It is the people’s right and obligation to make those petitions.

The priest introduces the universal prayer and concludes it, but you might be interested in seeing the list of people the General Instruction permits to read the intentions: They are read “by the Deacon or by a cantor, a reader, or one of the lay faithful” (71). You see who’s missing from that list? The priest. The priest does not list the intentions, even at daily Mass; this is the prayer of the faithful.

The eucharistic prayer. As I cited earlier this morning, the General instruction says that the meaning of the eucharistic 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” (78). Intentionality applies to the people even at the times when they are silent. The people are expected to pray throughout the entire eucharistic prayer. This takes focus and intentionality.

Except for the first one, all the eucharistic prayers follow the same structure: They begin with the opening dialogue, and then the priest gives thanks to God in the preface. The preface may reflect on the season, feast or occasion for the Mass, and it always gives thanks; it never makes a request. Then all sing the *Sanctus*; all of this is part of the eucharistic prayer. Then the priest gives more reasons for thanksgiving as he transitions into the epiclesis, calling upon the Holy Spirit to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. The institution narrative and consecration summarize the words of Jesus at the Last Supper. The priest is still giving thanks to God; one of the reasons for thanksgiving is what Jesus said and did. Then, in the anamnesis, the priest tells God that we are doing what Jesus told us to do in memory of him. He then offers the sacrifice to God in words such as, “We offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice.” Finally, the priest goes through a list of petitions for leaders of the Church, the entire Church, the living and the dead, invoking again the role of the Holy Spirit. His doxology elicits a great “Amen” from the people. Therefore, if you want to participate fully, consciously and actively in the eucharistic prayer, think thoughts of thanksgiving when the prayer gets underway, and think thoughts of petition when the prayer nears its end.

The sign of peace. Many dioceses and parishes suspended the sign of peace during the pandemic. My diocese kept it; we just told people not to touch one another. I don’t know how your typical daily Mass looks, but at home the people who attended daily Mass even before the pandemic were exemplars of social distancing. They scattered all throughout the church where they could

avoid physical contact with one another and wave at everybody during the sign of peace. I used to make fun of this, but now I realize they were ahead of their time.

Still, in keeping with the theme of intentionality, let us review how the Order of Mass describes the sign of peace. Like the universal prayer, this was an ancient custom that the church of the Second Vatican Council restored. So the revised liturgy took the unusual step to explain it: “And all offer one another a sign, in keeping with local customs, that expresses peace, communion, and charity” (128). Some people ridicule the sign of peace because it seems like an odd time to introduce yourself to people. It is an odd time to introduce yourself to people; you should have done that when you got to Mass early. Introductions are not the purpose of the sign of peace. It is supposed to express peace, communion, and charity. Notice, it is not supposed to create peace, communion, and charity. It presumes that those virtues already exist among the priestly people. You are expressing the peace that Christ gives you; you are already in the communion that will enfold you most excellently in the sacrament; and you are showing charity.

Incidentally, once the Lamb of God begins, intentionality expects you to stop the sign of peace and get your head wrapped around the Lamb of God. Some communion ministers enter the sanctuary offering peace to one another, which is well intentioned, but not appropriate if the Lamb of God has begun. From that moment, everyone is to be singing to Christ, the Lamb of God, not sharing peace still with their neighbor.

Extraordinary minister of holy communion. Those who assist in the distribution help bring the celebration of the Mass to its climax. The number one way to participate fully, consciously and actively at Mass is to receive communion. The short prayer that the priest offers after communion presents the gathered community to the Father one last time. Many of us priests do not put much effort into it, and I’m sure many of the faithful don’t listen much to it. But we are addressing God, so it’s a good idea to know what we’re telling him. That prayer presumes that everyone who answers “Amen” to it has just received communion. Communion ministers help us bring the community to that stage.

To that end, communion ministers should be devoutly aware of the great mystery they hold in their hands. The Catechism of the Catholic Church quotes Pope Saint Paul VI to explain our belief that Christ is truly present in the eucharist: “This presence is called ‘real’ - by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be ‘real’ too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a *substantial* presence by which Christ, God and human, makes himself wholly and entirely present” (1374). Communion ministers get to hear one Catholic after another express their faith in this mystery as they say the word “Amen” each time the minister says, “The Body of Christ.”

In line with St. Paul, the expression “the Body of Christ” also defines the community that has gathered for worship, the priestly people. Communion ministers are expected to be agents of that communion. At the blessing of a new

communion minister, the priest introduces the ceremony with this admonition: “In this ministry you must be examples of Christian living in faith and conduct; you must strive to grow in holiness through this sacrament of unity and love. Remember that, though many, we are one body because we share the one bread and one cup. As ministers of holy communion be, therefore, especially observant of the Lord’s command to love your neighbor. For when he gave his body as food to his disciples, he said to them: ‘This is my commandment, that you should love one another as I have loved you.’” At the Last Supper Jesus’s love for his followers came to the fore as he washed their feet and prayed for their unity. Ministers of holy communion do more than pass out consecrated bread and wine: Even outside of Mass they serve the community and unite the community. *Poder es servir*.

Communion from the altar. Every priest is required to receive communion from the Body and Blood of Christ consecrated at that Mass. Even concelebrants may not receive communion from the tabernacle. The integrity of the Mass demands it. The gifts we offer become the gifts that are consecrated, and these become the same gifts we receive in holy communion.

Paragraph 85 of the General Instruction says this: “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, so that even by means of the signs Communion may stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated.” This is being broadly ignored in too many Catholic parishes, and it has frustrated one of the primary ends of the reformed liturgy.

If the faithful are the priestly people, and they are, then they ideally receive communion from the same sacrifice of the Mass as the ordained priest. This draws them completely into the service. As they have offered their sacrifice, so God has consecrated it, and so they receive it back.

However, at almost every Mass, before the distribution of communion, someone goes to the tabernacle and brings to the altar hosts consecrated at a previous Mass. Some priest, deacon or communion minister then distributes them to the faithful at Mass because—who cares? The Body of Christ is the Body of Christ. But it’s not the same symbol. The faithful can receive communion from the tabernacle at a communion service; but they can only receive communion from the altar at Mass.

Perhaps it’s no surprise, then, that Catholics reverence the tabernacle after receiving communion. We’ve been teaching them that the priest is fed from the altar, but the people are fed elsewhere. This has had an impact on the placement of tabernacles in sanctuaries and on reverences during Mass, even after communion. Every time we distribute communion from the tabernacle at Mass we diminish the role of the priestly people. They do not receive the fruits of the very sacrifice that they have made. Better is to set out sufficient hosts for the number of communicants expected. A sacristan can recount heads before the gifts are brought to the altar and adjust the number of hosts. If the tabernacle fills up with

hosts, then the priest may need to choose a Mass or a weekend to distribute them. But there's absolutely no need to give communion from the tabernacle at every single Mass.

The concluding rites. The Mass comes to a solemn close that sends forth the priestly people. Some Catholics have never experienced the concluding rites because they leave right after communion. They got what they came for. This also fits the now-dead paradigm of the three principal parts of the Mass. But again, full, conscious active participation demands intentionality to the end: After communion, spend time in quiet thanksgiving, listen to the priest's prayer after communion, let the announcements challenge you to put your faith into action, receive the priest's blessing, and follow the deacon's command to go and announce the gospel of the Lord. As the priestly people gathers together, stands together, sings together, listens together, and prays together, so do the priestly people go forth together into the world as the Body of Christ.

Let me pose some questions for your reflection.

When do you typically arrive at church for Mass? What routine do you follow upon entering? Do you greet people? Do you make a reverence? Do you kneel before the Mass begins. What do you do? And why?

What is your attitude about the music at your church? Are you grateful for the musicians who prepared for the Mass? Do you respond to their invitation? What in your life gives you a reason to sing?

What do you pray for when you the priest says, "Let us pray"? What are the concerns you carry right now? Are you bringing them to the Mass?

How do you prepare for the Liturgy of the Word? Do the readings come as a surprise to you, or have you prepared for them?

What sacrifice are you bringing to Mass this week? How have you spent your time? What is the best offering you will present on the altar in hopes that God will accept it?

For what are you most grateful this week? When the eucharistic prayer begins, what gives you reason to give thanks? What has God done for you lately?

Since you last received holy communion, how have you served others? How have you been a source of unity?

When the deacon sends you forth after Mass, where do you go? What is the field of your mission? Where do you expect to meet Christ this week?

You have claimed your baptism, now put liturgy into action.