

Preparing the Bishop's Liturgical Celebrations: The English-Speaking Experience

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Introduction

When a bishop presides at a liturgy, a master of ceremonies usually takes responsibility for the preparation and execution of the celebration. This practice instills confidence in the bishop even in the most complex ceremonies, and it aids the people in their prayer. To accomplish this, the master of ceremonies acquires an understanding of each particular celebration and infuses all its actions with appropriate dignity.

The Pontifical Liturgical Institute of the Pontifical Athenaeum Sant' Anselmo has asked me to share a local experience of preparing a bishop's celebrations, one example from the English-speaking world. I serve as pastor of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and Director of the Office of Divine Worship for the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph in the State of Missouri, right in the middle of the United States of America. Our diocese has 87 parishes throughout more than 15,000 square miles (about 40,000 square kilometers), half of them in the urban centers of Kansas City and St. Joseph, and half in rural communities. The total population of the diocese is over one and a half million people, and Catholics make up about seven and a half percent of them, or around 120,000. The Most Reverend James Vann Johnston is our bishop, and he uses a master of ceremonies at almost every episcopal liturgy.

The Bishop

Preparation for any liturgical celebration requires attention to all the ministers, but especially when one of them is a bishop. Presiding at liturgy is central to the ministry of any priest, and especially to the ministry of the bishop. Pope Francis makes this point in his Apostolic Letter *Desiderio Desideravi*.

The priest lives his characteristic participation in the celebration in virtue of the gift received in the sacrament of Holy Orders, and this is expressed precisely in presiding. Like all the roles he is called to carry out, this is not primarily a duty assigned to him by the community but is rather a consequence of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit received in ordination which equips him for such a task. The priest also is formed by his presiding in the celebrating assembly (56).

This applies all the more to a bishop, whom many people encounter personally only in his liturgical role as a presider. The presence of other ministers, especially of deacons, helps clarify the liturgical and governing role of the bishop.

The bishop establishes the liturgical norms for his diocese (Code of Canon Law 838 §4). He therefore wants to ensure that he is celebrating the liturgy correctly. Liturgical rules are complex and scattered among many documents. As with other fields of study in the Catholic Church—canon law, moral theology, and biblical studies, for example—so it is hard to keep current. A bishop relies on the assistance of people expert in such matters, such as directors of offices of divine worship and masters of ceremonies.

As with any priest, each bishop has unique preferences about the liturgies over which he presides. The location of the chairs, the activity of deacons, the arrangement of objects on the altar, the frequency of using incense, the choice of eucharistic prayer—these and other topics lie within the realm of preference, so one bishop prefers options that others do not. The bishop is therefore under the watchful eye of many people—clergy and lay alike—who scrutinize what he does down to minute details.

In the liturgy, the presiding bishop not only inspires people, but catechizes them as well. As Pope Francis says, there is “formation for the Liturgy and formation by the Liturgy” (DD 34). The beauty of episcopal ceremonies will form the faith of the people of God. Consequently, the bishop strives to preside well. Like any priest, he is to be a celebrant, not a celebrity. He draws attention to the sacred mysteries, not to himself. This challenges many bishops because they are indeed celebrities, very well known to the community. However, while presiding they immerse themselves ever more deeply into the words and actions of the liturgy so that they may be at prayer and lead others to prayer.

The Master of Ceremonies

The master of ceremonies, then, aids the bishop in this pursuit. With careful attention to detail and a prayerful demeanor, the master of ceremonies keeps the liturgy flowing so that the bishop may concentrate on celebrating.

In recent years in my diocese, we had one bishop who preferred a single master of ceremonies, and another who prefers several, especially drawn from among our deacons. When there is one master of ceremonies for all the principal liturgies, that minister comes to know the bishop's preferences very well, and the bishop feels a confident trust. Although the relationship is not between equals, the two enter a friendly covenant in which the master of ceremonies provides what the bishop requires. This teamwork puts a single liaison between the bishop and others preparing the liturgy and provides much-valued consistency.

On the other hand, having several masters of ceremonies provides different benefits. Over the course of a year, the bishop naturally spends time with each member of this group, so he builds several relationships and, in the case of deacons, he learns more about each one's life and ministry.

Within a group of masters of ceremonies, individuals develop particular skills. Some speak a language in which the bishop is not fluent; in my diocese, for example, a master of ceremonies conversant in Spanish or Vietnamese provides vital assistance at certain celebrations. Some have professional abilities

to manage complex ceremonies such as the Chrism Mass, ordinations and the Easter Vigil; others faithfully assist more ordinary celebrations.

In my diocese, some masters of ceremonies are laymen. They are fine students of the liturgy and have proven themselves as sacristans and altar servers. In the past we have had laywomen serve as masters of ceremonies. Although that is not the case today, some laywomen capably fulfill this role in other dioceses of English-speaking countries.

Occasionally a priest serves as a master of ceremonies, but in my diocese this has become rare. The priest's role at an episcopal celebration is more properly to concelebrate with the bishop. Even though many priests are knowledgeable about episcopal liturgies, we usually let them serve as priests. I myself, even though I work closely with our masters of ceremonies, do not assist as one. If I'm present at a Mass with the bishop, I concelebrate.

Deacons make good candidates for masters of ceremonies because they know what needs to happen at an altar at the weekly Mass; they then understand the framework for more complex celebrations. Even so, like priests, deacons have a role: They are deacons. Their ministry as deacons helps the liturgy flow, supervising many of the actions so that the presider can focus on praying. The Ceremonial of Bishops envisions that three deacons assist the bishop when he presides at Mass. They fulfill the duties that are often assigned to a master of ceremonies, such as handling the bishop's miter, crosier and zucchetto. Lay masters of ceremonies free the deacons to serve as deacons. But when there are many deacons present, such as at major diocesan liturgies, one or more may separate themselves from the group to act as masters of ceremonies.

The masters of ceremonies who receive the most negative criticism in English-speaking dioceses are those who become a center of attention. In their efforts to serve the bishop, they sometimes forsake the hidden spaces on the edges of the liturgical actions and stand right next to the bishop, even when he would be fine standing alone. When a master of ceremonies needs the assistance of servers, some signals may be exchanged. The master of ceremonies may think that these go unnoticed, but often such hand gestures are quite evident and distracting to the people. In the worst cases, the master of ceremonies physically grabs the arms of servers, or pushes their shoulders, to guide them into place. In the irenic context of the liturgy, such actions seem aggressive. These are extreme examples, but they happen.

A good master of ceremonies allows sufficient time to rehearse the servers before the liturgy begins, so that the servers feel confident when fulfilling their role. The best master of ceremonies is the one people barely notice.

Moreover, the master of ceremonies, like anyone else in the congregation, is there primarily for a single purpose: to participate fully, consciously and actively in the liturgy. Everyone is to observe common postures, sing the hymns, make the responses, listen to the readings, reflect on the homily, and prepare themselves for communion. Some masters of ceremonies dissociate themselves from these actions by focusing overmuch on their role. They become observers

of the liturgies, rather than participants. The same hazard tempts other ministers, notably musicians, servers, ushers and collaborators such as photographers. They sometimes focus so much on their pieces of the liturgy, that they pass time thinking about what they do next, rather than fully participating in the action underway. Vested ministers should not casually chat with each other in full view of the faithful, nor should they engage their cellphones to communicate or take photos during the liturgy. A good master of ceremonies is a model of prayerful participation in the Mass, fulfilling duties as required, so that others may prayerfully participate as well.

I ask all the masters of ceremonies in our diocese to meet as a group several times a year. Together we survey the upcoming episcopal liturgies and decide who will be present for which. We also go over questions that they bring or nuances that I'd like to review. I prepared a master document for their referral, which treats many rubrical details that are often overlooked. I offer them catechesis on the liturgy and help them to appreciate the beauty of Catholic traditions. I want them to become familiar with the primary liturgical resources: the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, the Order of Mass, and the Ceremonial of Bishops, for example. They should be able to find correct pages in the lectionary and Roman Missal. They also need to know the Order of Confirmation because the bishop celebrates it in the parishes frequently throughout the year. They have learned how to read rubrics, check pages in various books, and grow in their personal formation.

They all rely on a planning sheet, unique to each celebration, prepared with the help of the diocesan Office of Divine Worship. One of our employees prepares the template for these celebrations weeks or months in advance, and works with the staff or volunteers at the host location to ensure that all preparations have been made. Some questions are practical: Where is the bishop supposed to park his car? Where will he vest? Are other priests concelebrating? Does your church have seven candles to be lighted when the bishop presides for Mass? Some information has to do with music and the ministers. Of course, the selection of scripture readings needs to be noted. Often a parish may choose from several options in the liturgical books.

Even so, at Confirmation, our bishop prefers whenever possible that one scripture reading be the account of Pentecost from Acts of the Apostles. However, on certain days, the readings and presidential prayers are predetermined. Our office fills out those parts of the forms. Local planners are less familiar with liturgical rules, so we prevent them from choosing readings that they are not allowed to use. For example, if the bishop is celebrating Confirmation in a parish church on a Sunday during Easter Time, the readings come from the Sunday liturgy, not from the Order of Confirmation.

Once the planning sheet has been prepared, our office presents a condensed version to the bishop's secretary, who includes it in the particular file she sets on his desk each day. Our bishop does not request all the details of every ceremony. He trusts us, but he wants to know unusual matters that he needs to keep in mind. He also wants a printed copy of the readings so that he

sees exactly what the readers are planning to proclaim. Shortly before the ceremony begins, the master of ceremonies will meet the bishop in the sacristy and review key elements in person so he knows what to expect.

At certain diocesan events, the liturgy includes some elements in Spanish—one of the scripture readings and some of the presidential prayers, for example. The master of ceremonies prepares the liturgical books accordingly. In our diocese we have many hispanic immigrants who have not learned English well, so having the bishop offer some prayers in Spanish during a liturgy otherwise in English shows his pastoral care for the diverse communities who have come together to worship as one.

In the United States, we anglophones obsess over time. We want events to begin on time, and we like each Mass to finish within one hour. We like short homilies, too. However, when a bishop presides, time gets lost. We may start late because extra details need more attention. He may preach longer than the local priest. The entire liturgy may take more time than anyone realized. But even we Americans learn that when the liturgy invites good participation, time doesn't matter so much. Still, I urge our masters of ceremonies to arrive plenty early so that all the preparations are in order, and the liturgy can begin on time.

Liturgies at the Cathedral

A bishop's ceremonies fall into two broad categories: those taking place at the cathedral and those taking place at other locations, such as parishes. Our bishop presides on occasion for regularly scheduled Sunday Masses at the cathedral. This does not happen every month, but with sufficient frequency. This connects him to the members of the cathedral parish, to our liturgical ministers, and the many visitors who come from out of town. These ordinary celebrations still require the presence of a master of ceremonies.

Recently, though, I've added rituals to some of these celebrations. For example, if one of our parish families is presenting a child for baptism, we may arrange it during a Sunday Mass when the bishop is scheduled to preside. Or, if we have unbaptized adults seeking entrance into the catechumenate, or a validly baptized Christian ready for the Rite of Reception into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church, we may arrange the celebration when the bishop will be at the cathedral for a regular Sunday Mass. Such events always send us researching through the Ceremonial of Bishops because there are always a few quirks, such as having the pastor concelebrate at the baptism of an infant in order to perform the anointings, while the bishop administers the water.

Other cathedral liturgies are more complex. In celebrations that happen rarely, the execution of the liturgy frequently differs from the rubrics in the book. The master of ceremonies needs to know both what the book says and what is actually going to happen. The Chrism Mass is a perfect example. I have yet to find a diocese that celebrates it exactly according to the Vatican's approved order of service. Even the celebration at St. Peter's Basilica has not precisely followed all the rubrics of the Chrism Mass through more than one papacy. In any diocese, this liturgy requires careful planning for the ordering of processions, the

participation of various ministers, and the preparation of oils for distribution among the priests when they depart from the ceremony.

At ordinations, we often use more than one master of ceremonies. Our candidates for ordination frequently ask for a special one to be assigned to them, so that they need not worry about remembering the details of the ceremony. They prefer to follow the instructions that a master of ceremonies delivers.

In our diocese we host other events at the cathedral. For example, each year the bishop presides for a special Mass at which couples celebrating their golden wedding anniversary may gather to thank God for the gift of their marriage. We also offer a biannual celebration bestowing awards to outstanding volunteers from the parishes. These events draw many visitors to the cathedral. The ceremonies are not complicated, but they still require a master of ceremonies able to move ministers and visitors while maintaining a prayerful disposition.

The Rite of Election usually takes place outside of Mass in our diocese, a practice common among English-speaking dioceses, even though the Roman Missal presumes that it occurs during Mass on the First Sunday of Lent. Even so, we require a skilled master of ceremonies and many volunteers to guide the procession of the catechumens who sign the book of the elect. We have so many catechumens that we celebrate this rite three times over the first weekend of Lent, twice in the Kansas City cathedral and once in St. Joseph.

The Ceremonial of Bishops says that the bishop may reserve not only the Rite of Election to himself, but also two of the ceremonies that usually follow it, the Presentation of the Creed and the Presentation of the Lord's Prayer. We have not offered these at our cathedral with the bishop, but we are on his calendar for these celebrations during special Masses on weeknights of Lent next year. We'll invite those who participated in the Rite of Election to return to the cathedral for the presentations. Our bishop has never presided at these, so our masters of ceremonies are also unfamiliar with them. But everyone will study what we need to know, and we'll be ready when those days arrive.

Liturgies at the Parishes

The bishop visits parishes and other institutions as part of his ministry. No one experiences the diverse liturgies of a diocese as much as a bishop does.

In our diocese, because of the distances involved, the master of ceremonies sometimes drives the bishop to a parish. The Ceremonial of Bishops is completely silent about that responsibility! But the ensuing conversation between the two of them en route is often informative, caring, and important.

Predictably, the sacrament of Confirmation is the most frequently celebrated episcopal liturgy in our parishes. This is fairly common in English-speaking dioceses, though some of them invite the candidates for Confirmation to a ceremony at the cathedral. Usually, though, the bishop goes to parishes and experiences the peculiar manifestations of the liturgy that each of them offers.

Our bishop also visits parishes when they celebrate significant anniversaries. One of ours recently had its one hundred fiftieth year, which by our

standards is a very long time, even though many parishes in Italy have been around many centuries longer than that. The master of ceremonies will help the parish celebrate significant occasions with ease and confidence.

Even though the master of ceremonies has studied the liturgy, learned the preferences of the bishop, and participated in formation events, something completely unexpected can happen in each parish. Pope Francis wrote about his own personal experience of this phenomenon in *Desiderio Desideravi*: “In visiting Christian communities, I have noticed that their way of living the liturgical celebration is conditioned — for better or, unfortunately, for worse — by the way in which their pastor presides in the assembly” (54). The bishop and the master of ceremonies learn much by the arrangement of furniture in the sanctuary, the presence or absence of significant liturgical books, the quality of the sound system, the discipline of the servers, and the condition of the building. Here, too, the master of ceremonies strikes a balance between respecting the traditions of the local community and forming its ministers in a practice more faithful to the liturgy of the Church.

Many of the people playing a role in the parish liturgy will feel nervous about executing it in the presence of the bishop. They want to do everything correctly and avoid criticism. They respect their bishop, and they want him to have a positive experience of their parish. The master of ceremonies can help ease these concerns by ministering to the ministers, making them feel prepared and confident for the ceremony to come. At its conclusion, the master of ceremonies would fittingly take time to affirm those who have served well. This will help them continue their dedicated service in the future.

Conclusion

The masters of ceremonies in a diocese like mine are people of great faith with a desire to serve. They respect the bishop and the Church's liturgy. When they are called to serve, they bring their faith with them.

They strive to be prayerful even as they manage some of the bothersome details of a service. They form the people they meet, especially in parishes. They continually study and learn the liturgy of the Church and the meaning behind the rubrics. They manifest the gospel at all times, evangelizing those who will encounter the good news through what may be for them a rare sighting of a Catholic bishop. They will also execute their role in humility.

They are called a “master” because they are a teacher, and a master “of ceremonies” because ultimately the ceremonies of the Church form them. When their ministry expresses their faith, it will also form their faith. They will prepare themselves well for the banquet that Christ prepares in heaven, where the true Master of ceremonies will put on an apron and serve them in thanks.