



FAITH FAITH IN FOCUS

Voice, posture, emphasis: What priests could learn from theater actors about saying Mass

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January 12, 2024

When I was just a few months ordained, I told my spiritual director that I didn't like the way I caught myself flying through the words of the eucharistic prayer. He said, "Already?" Every priest fights this temptation, and it can afflict us early on. Now when I preside, I apply some principles from theater to augment how I celebrate the Mass and make sure I am not simply rushing through it.

Theatrical principles influence the voice, the vestments, the face and the hands. We priests are public speakers, and we use the rest of our bodies too. What we say is important, and so is how we look and what we do. It all contributes to a dignified celebration of the Mass. I aim for a reverence that helps the people participate. The [National Eucharistic Revival](#), a "movement to restore understanding and devotion" to the sacrament, makes this an appropriate time for self-review.

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The church asks for pastors to celebrate Mass in a way that involves the people more deeply. The Second Vatican Council's "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy" states, "Pastors of souls must therefore realize that, when the liturgy is celebrated, something more is required than the mere observation of the laws governing valid and licit celebration; it is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects" (No. 11).

The "General Instruction of the Roman Missal" (G.I.R.M.) picks up on this. It says twice that one of a priest's duties is to associate the people with himself (No. 78, 93). In fact, "by his bearing and by the way he pronounces the divine words he must convey to the faithful the living presence of Christ" (No. 93).

The Voice

As in theater, the voice is key for the celebration of liturgy. The human voice is a musical instrument. It has pitch and tone, volume and pacing. When I listen to people from other English-speaking countries, many of their voices sound more melodious than the flat patterns I commonly hear in the United States. Diversifying the voice is especially difficult for us.

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The “General Instruction” states, “In texts that are to be pronounced in a loud and clear voice, whether by the Priest or the Deacon, or by a reader, or by everyone, the voice should correspond to the genre of the text itself...; it should also be suited to the form of celebration and to the solemnity of the gathering” (No. 38).

Listen to yourself when you are conversing with someone about a topic you love. Your voice becomes animated. You use a range of high and low pitches, speak quickly or slowly, use many words or few. Your voice may be loud or soft, and your tone varies from the intimately loving to the aggressively threatening.

Applying this range of options during Mass is more natural when we are preaching because the words at that point are our own. Yet even when reading the prayers in the Missal, verbally coaxing out their meaning can invite the people into a spirit of prayer.

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For instance, the densely packed words of [the collect](#), which takes place early in the liturgy, are unlike the way we converse. This prayer, concluding the introductory rites, often sets the tone for the day or time of year. I treat the collect more like a poem than prose.

First, after the words, “Let us pray,” I pause for a generous silence so that people may become aware of being in God’s presence and call to mind their intentions (G.I.R.M., No. 54). I like to wait while the room quiets down, making people aware of the silence and allowing them to contribute to it.

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Then I choose a slow pace and pray the collect, phrase by phrase. For example, on the first Sunday of Advent, the first line reads, “Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God.” I keep my voice up for the word “faithful” and pause briefly afterwards.

Then I lower the volume and pitch and quicken the pace for the less central words, “we pray, almighty God.” I begin the second line, “the resolve to run forth to [meet your Christ](#),” at the original pitch and volume.

Speaking in this way, lessening the stress on words that otherwise may get in the way, helps people grasp the complete thought from verb to direct object: We are asking God to “grant the resolve.”

I leave another pause just before the concluding phrase that begins, “Through our Lord Jesus Christ.” This gives people time to think about this particular prayer. During that short silence I close my hands for that final phrase, as the “Ceremonial of Bishops” requests (No. 136). The visual cue moves the people to sum up their thoughts.

Properly chosen emphasis

The lengthy eucharistic prayer is harder to proclaim with interest, so I search for key words to stress. For example, in Eucharistic Prayer III, after proclaiming “all you have created rightly gives you praise,” I like to highlight the word “people” as a specific illustration of this: “you never cease to gather a *people* to yourself.”

Later in the prayer, I find another contrast in these words: “May this Sacrifice of *our* reconciliation, we pray, O Lord, advance the peace and salvation of *all* the world.”

Again, I choose not to emphasize certain words, such as “we pray, O Lord,” because they add more color than content. The same is true of the frequent occurrence of “graciously.” It is almost never the central thought.

Throughout the eucharistic prayer, I choose a pace that lets me emphasize certain words. Like the younger, newly ordained me, many priests race through these prayers. They may be unaware of how difficult it is for some people to grasp the words. Our job as priests is to associate the people with ourselves when we pray, and that includes the way we use our voice. We must pray sincerely. We can draw the people not only into the Eucharist, but into the intention of the Eucharistic Revival by more deliberately inviting their participation in the prayer.

Bodily postures

Besides how the priest uses his voice, the expression on his face also matters. It can demonstrate the emotion appropriate to the text. In my years of service, a couple of people have told me I looked angry or bored—when I was not that at all. At times, I need to fix my face.

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When addressing God in a prayer, for example, I look up above the heads of the people or lower my head into the book. However, when I am addressing the people, I look at them. The Gloria is addressed to God, but the creed seems more addressed to the assembly. I look up during the Gloria, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace to people of good will.” I look at the people for the Creed, “I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.” I search out their faces to unite our hearts in one common faith. When I declare “I believe,” they can look back reciting the same words with confidence and in unity.

The rest of the body can inspire prayer as well. In the entrance procession, I prefer a pace far slower than I use for walking around the office or out on the street. I join the singing and ascend the sanctuary steps with deliberation.

When I approach the altar, I kiss it, thinking about the sacrifice Christ offered and the ones that I am offering this day. I kiss the altar in loving duty. If our actions look purposeful, they will lead others to prayer.

Details matter

Effective speaking requires a good sound system and the skill to use it. Some speakers stand behind a microphone pointed too high or too low, which cancels the effect of the mic. If the system itself is inadequate, if people cannot understand you, it is time to invest in something better. One bishop told me that when he goes around his diocese, very few people comment about what he said—but everyone will complain if they cannot hear him! Sound matters.

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Our vestments matter. After vesting, I check the mirror to make sure I have everything on straight. If I look askew, I distract the people.

In theater, the same holds for costumes, sound and lighting. If an actor’s clothes do not fit, or if the lighting points toward inessentials, people get distracted from the point of the play.

Effective presiders should break the fourth wall

Theater differs from church in one important way: Theater employs the “fourth wall.” The three walls that surround the stage are visible and critical for actors and audience. But between the stage and the seats is a “fourth wall,” invisible to the audience but opaque to the actors. The audience sees through it and views everything on stage.

But, unless it is an intentional “direct address,” as you sometimes see in a Shakespeare monologue, the actors do not look upon the audience or talk to them without breaking the wall. The fourth wall provides distance between audience and actor; it distinguishes that the spectators are watching the actor do something they are not explicitly part of.

At church, there is no fourth wall. All of us, priests, ministers and congregants are on the “stage” together. We all interact with one another. The priest leads the action so that all participate better. He associates the people with himself.

Some of the faithful sit in the back of the church to install the fourth wall. If they come as spectators rather than participants, it is difficult to preside for them. In churches with a long nave, the building fights good presiding. Nonetheless, if we focus on good principles, some borrowed from theater, we can achieve marvelous results.

During the Eucharistic Revival in the United States, we priests will help draw attention to our own belief in the real presence of Christ if we celebrate the Eucharist with dignity. How we sound, how we look and how we move will all contribute to communicating our faith to the people of God.



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