

HOW WE Worship

The Eucharist, the Sacraments,
and the Hours

REV. LAWRENCE E. MICK



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INTRODUCTION

The Meaning of Liturgy

The Gospel according to John begins with these words: “In the beginning was the Word.” Our discussion of liturgy might also begin with the Word. What do we mean by the word “liturgy”? The dictionary defines liturgy as “a rite or body of rites prescribed for public worship.” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: “The word ‘liturgy’ originally meant a ‘public work’ or a ‘service in the name of/on behalf of the people.’ In Christian tradition it means the participation of the People of God in ‘the work of God’” (1069).

Each definition gives us some important hints. The dictionary speaks of “rites,” which we will consider shortly in more detail. Rites are patterns of behavior that enable a group of people to act together and to express matters of deep significance to them. The ritual nature of liturgy allows participants to engage in a common act of worship with some degree of ease because they know what comes next at any point.

The second definition in the dictionary for “liturgy” is “a eucharistic rite.” Since the Eucharist is the central ritual of Christians, it is understandable that many peo-

ple think that “liturgy” always means the Eucharist. In the Catholic tradition, however, liturgy includes all seven of the sacramental celebrations as well as the Liturgy of the Hours, sometimes called the Divine Office. These are the official acts of public worship carried out in the name of the whole Church.

Of course, there are many other ways that Christians pray, both individually and in groups. Every believer should pray on his or her own every day, and groups of believers gather for a variety of forms of prayer and devotion together. While these prayers, especially those shared in groups, have many aspects in common with liturgy, they are not included in the category of liturgy.

The catechism definition harkens back to the origin of the word in Greek. *Leitourgia* is commonly translated as “work of the people.” It originally meant a public work, often done or paid for by a wealthy citizen on behalf of the community, such as providing a warship or building a gymnasium. Eventually, the meaning was extended to include any kind of public service, including public religious services.

In one sense, then, liturgy refers to work done on behalf of the people, but the catechism notes that in the Christian tradition it means the participation *of the people* as well. Liturgy is not something done by the priest or other ministers for a passive audience. It is the work of all gathered, who engage in the worship of God together.

Though different members of the community may carry out different roles within the liturgy, Christian

worship is the responsibility and the activity of the whole assembly gathered together. Each member of the assembly has an essential role to play. In a sense, there is no audience at all. Some have suggested that the only audience at worship is God, to whom the worship is offered. But God also has a major role in the liturgy itself, as we shall see later.

THE LANGUAGE OF LITURGY

It is necessary for all those present who take part in the liturgy of the Church to have some basic knowledge of the language of worship. This is not primarily a matter of learning the meaning of a list of terms, but rather learning the ways that liturgy speaks, which includes much more than words. Liturgy is ritual action, and rituals are composed of symbolic objects, movements, and gestures along with spoken and sung words.

Some people find this necessity of learning liturgy's "vocabulary" a turn-off. They want to know why the liturgy can't be more readily accessible to a person who wanders in from the street.

This expectation is rather unrealistic, however. Any complex human activity has its own vocabulary and grammar. Think, for example, of the game of American football. Many people from other countries, where "football" is another name for soccer, find this American game quite confusing. This fact has led to various examples of humor, like the story of the young woman who accompa-

nied her boyfriend to her very first football game. On the way out of the stadium, she told him she thought it was very silly for all those grown men to fight that long over twenty-five cents. When her boyfriend asked her what she was talking about, she noted that people were constantly shouting, “Get the quarter back!”

In 1953, a little-known comic named Andy Griffith gained national fame by describing a football game from the vantage point of a country boy at his first college game. The sketch was called “What It Was, Was Football,” and he ended it with this description: “I think that it’s some kindly of a contest where they see which bunchful of them men can take that punkin an’ run from one end of that cow pasture to the other, without either gettin’ knocked down or steppin’ in somethin’!” So it seemed to one who didn’t know the rules and vocabulary of the game.

Notice, too, that the vocabulary needed to understand a football game goes beyond spoken words. There are hand and arm gestures by the referees that tell much about what is happening on the field. Recognizing different formations and plays by the team requires some familiarity with the game and typical strategies. Even the cheerleaders have a repertoire of athletic moves that shape the overall experience of the crowd. And if you want to be a full participant in the event, you need to know how to act when various things happen during the game, whether it’s just cheering when your team makes a good play or taking part in the “wave.”

We find many similar realities when we examine the liturgy. While most anyone can sit on the sidelines and draw some benefit from the experience, those who want to really enter into the liturgy and draw the most from it need to learn its vocabulary and grammar. Some of this is purely verbal. There are words that are used in Christian worship that are not used in everyday speech, like *epiclesis* (invoking the Spirit) and *anamnesis* (the kind of remembering that makes the event present). Others are borrowed from everyday language but have different nuances, like “communion” and “consecration” and “remembrance.”

The vocabulary of liturgy also goes beyond words. Meaning is conveyed, often more powerfully than words can manage, through symbols and ritual actions. These, too, must be learned and appreciated if a person wants to fully engage in the liturgical experience.

Symbols are often misunderstood in our society. A symbol is not the same as a sign. While a sign communicates some information, it generally refers us to something separated from itself. A billboard advertising a car dealer points us to the dealer’s location, but you can’t buy a car at the billboard. A symbol, on the other hand, somehow contains the reality it signifies. Consider a wedding ring after the death of a spouse, for example. That ring says far more than “I was married.” It reminds the surviving spouse of a multitude of experiences and feelings from a life lived together. Or think of a kiss between lovers. The love is not somewhere else but somehow is contained in

the kiss itself. Though the kiss does not contain all of the love, it does contain the reality it signifies. So, to say that a sacrament is a symbol is not to suggest it is not real. The sacramental symbol contains what it signifies.

Symbols are important in worship because they allow us to communicate realities that seem impossible to adequately express in words. They touch us on many levels at once, affecting our minds and hearts and spirits. Symbols may be strung together to form ritual actions, but even a single symbol is often an action rather than an object. It is what we do with water or oil or bread or wine that communicates the deep meaning we share in worship.

A FOUR-PART STRUCTURE

It is also important to understand the relationship between different parts of the liturgy. Though the liturgy has some unique vocabulary, it also draws on basic human activities to create its symbols and ritual patterns. Most liturgies follow the same basic structure as many other human gatherings.

This structure has four parts. The first is simply the gathering itself. People come together, whether for worship or for a party or for Thanksgiving dinner. The gathering involves more than just arriving at the same place. People greet one another, exchange pleasantries, and reconnect their lives.

Then there is a time for verbal sharing. At a party, this may be informal “catching up” on each other’s lives.