

Especially for Planners

A Question of Reverence

A mystery was solved the other day—at least for me.

The conversation went pretty much as countless others had on the same topic, the changes in the Mass. Reference to “the changes” was vague, but there was nothing vague about the people’s feelings. They were definite and they were negative.

What caused such feelings? The conversation touched upon individual changes, such as standing for Communion, guitars, lectors, lay ministers of the Eucharist, and many others. The discontented speakers could agree with logical explanations of individual changes; they could accept this or that innovation. But when the changes were all lumped together, they had problems.

There was something mysteriously wrong with those changes. Within these people there was sort of a sixth sense telling them that something was amiss. What was causing these good and reasonable people to react so negatively?

It’s hard to say how the subject came up, but when it did we all knew that we had the answer. It was something very simple: reverence. Or, rather, it was the lack of reverence. Those people could accept change. What they could not accept was less reverence.

When you think about it, it’s very important. It is defined as “a feeling of profound respect often mingled with awe and affection.” What it comes down to is our recognition that we are not God, that he is infinitely greater, beyond what the eye has not seen or ear has heard. It would be hard to overestimate the importance of this belief. It is absolutely fundamental to everything believers do, especially their worship. And this is the belief we convey through worship.

To the extent that any change in the liturgy appears to chip away the sense of reverence, it is a first step toward erosion of faith. If standing for Communion means sauntering forward to meet God, if the use of lay lectors means mangling the sacred Word, if Communion in the hand means popping the host in your mouth like candy, if guitars mean entertaining the congregation with hit tunes, then the sixth sense of many Catholics will rightly send up signals of alarm.

Of course, none of the above changes need ever mean a lessening of reverence. Reverence has much more to do with *how* than with *what*. Kneeling for Communion displays very little reverence when it comes to jostling for the empty spot at the rail. Organ music can create a cheap atmosphere just as easily as inept guitar strumming.

The host can be snatched with the mouth just as irreverently as with the hand. The words of Scripture can be mangled just as badly by an ordained priest rushing through the reading as by a lay lector who is ill prepared.

The danger of irreverence is always with us. St. Paul chided the people of Corinth for their lack of reverence. Every generation since has needed a reminder or two.

Our generation is no exception. Unintentionally, we have conveyed the wrong message to people. We have seemed to say, "You don't have to be reverent any more." That is something we can never say. Vatican II did not discover that the pearl of great price was really custom jewelry. Nor has God been devalued along with the dollar.

Creating and maintaining a sense of reverence is the first responsibility of all who plan liturgies and of all who minister in public roles. This assumption lies beneath everything I have to say. I hope to offer some practical suggestions for achieving that atmosphere.

But first, how can we tell whether or not we have succeeded?

Audience Feedback

Nearly 60 percent of the new TV shows do not make it through the average 13-week season. Broadway plays can close after one night if poorly received. Magazines and other periodicals face this same life-and-death test: audience reaction.

Sunday liturgies are an exception. They go on week after week regardless of what people think. And what people think about liturgies is not always that good, at least judging by my informal surveys.

Before going further, some acknowledgment of the dedication of average Catholic churchgoers is in order. They are faithful in attending a liturgy whose inner meaning they treasure, but whose externals (music, sermon, etc.) they often find poorly done and/or boring. Their faithfulness deserves recognition.

Now back to the question of audience reaction. The very best kind of audience feedback is the type that is spontaneous and basic. *Spontaneous*: not filtered, given without thinking too much about it, often not even intended as feedback—simply a natural reaction. *Basic*: directed toward the fundamental question – "Did you like it?"

Broadway plays and other productions get feedback that is as spontaneous and basic as you can get: People either go or don't go. We don't get that kind of feedback for Sunday liturgies because people are obliged to attend. Liturgical leaders in a parish may think they get a lot of feedback, but I doubt if they really do.

Most of the parishioners with whom priests and worship commission members brush elbows are not representative of the average. Instead, they are the more involved people in the parish – council members, commission members, religious education teachers, St. Vincent de Paul members, or simply people who make it a point to speak up now and then. Their feedback can be deceptive because this can be a fairly large number of people and we see a lot of them. Actually, they are probably only about five percent of the parish. Their feedback, helpful as it might be, should not be mistaken for feedback from the parish at large.

A meal's worse judges are the chefs who prepare it. The best judges are those who eat it. The same is true in liturgy. The worse judges are the actual ministers and those who planned it. The best judges are the people in the pews.

Finding the “Fidget Level”

There is a readily available form of feedback from the people in the pew. It is spontaneous and basic and immediately within reach. I am referring to what I call the “fidget level” of the congregation. By my scientific reckoning, there are four fidget levels:

1. *Zero Fidget Level.* The congregation could be described as “hushed.” There is almost no shuffling, coughing or rustling. When you look out over the people you notice that all heads are still, all directed toward whatever is taking place. Even the ushers and musicians are absorbed in what is happening.
2. *Light Fidget Level.* As you look over the congregation you notice that some of the heads are moving about slowly. Some of the people are no longer directing their full attention to what is taking place. They are looking at stained glass windows, the people in the next pew, or the parish bulletin. Crowd noises are low, but they are there; and if you close your eyes and listen you can easily notice them. The spell of a hushed congregation has been broken.
3. *Medium Fidget Level.* You don't have to shut your eyes to notice the crowd noise. There is a good bit of rustling and coughing. There is a lot of movement out there – not just heads, but arms moving, bodies squirming. They are losing interest.

4. *Heavy Fidget Level.* All hell is breaking loose. Well, not really. We are still in the category of “fidget” (as opposed to dashing to and fro), so there are certain limits. However, crowd noises are very high. There is a lot of head and body movement – not slow, but jerky. You can even notice some people whispering to one another. The congregation is bored and tired and getting irritable.

Fidget level is feedback of the very best kind. It is *spontaneous*: People are not aware of their own shuffling and they do not intend it as feedback; they are simply doing it naturally. It is also *basic*: They are either absorbed in what is taking place or they are not.

Assuming you agree with my scientific categories, the question is this: How low a fidget level should a reasonably good presider, lector, preacher, or other leader be able to maintain. Here is the scale I would use if I were czar of all liturgies in the world:

Parts of the Mass: Maximum Fidget Level

Introductory Ceremonies: Light

Scripture Readings: Zero

Homily: Zero

Preparation of the Gifts: Light

Eucharistic Prayer: Zero

Lord’s Prayer and Sign of Peace: Light

Distribution of Communion: Light

Reflection after Communion: Zero

Closing Ceremonies: Light

If on a given Sunday a minister did not achieve the prescribed level, that wouldn’t mean automatic dismissal—even if I were the czar. We’re all allowed to fall short now and then. What I would require is that he or she take steps to find out why, get some suggestions, or schedule practice rather than simply settling for a medium or heavy fidget level. A professional golfer can have a bad hook or slice now and then, but he or she very quickly takes remedial steps if it happens too often.

I really don’t think that the above chart is unrealistic. It’s not as though one person were expected to maintain a zero or light level for 45 minutes straight. The Mass is nicely broken up into parts and there is a “break” between each part. No part lasts (or need last) longer than seven to ten minutes. There is no reason why the person leading each part cannot fully engage the congregation for those few minutes.

Some people who lead liturgies might disagree. They have gotten used to higher crowd noise and think it could be no other way for the average Sunday congregation. Once we do that, we’ll never work hard to find a way to achieve the hush of congregational approval.

We have all heard preachers continue blithely for 20 minutes when after the first five minutes a medium or heavy fidget level has developed right in front of them. I remember one time assisting a priest at a Baptism during Mass, and before long the fidget level was heavy—very heavy. He went on, oblivious to it all, explaining (at length) the symbolism of each and every action as though the congregation was as interested as he was. Actually, they were bored and were saying so, except he ignored it. Or, maybe he didn't notice it and felt that, like it or not, this was *good* for them.

I disagree. The people should never have to endure a liturgy any more than they have to endure a conversation.

In closing, let me say that I realize I have been talking about liturgy mostly from a human point of view—comparing it to Broadway productions, TV shows and the like. The liturgy, of course, is much more than simply a human experience. Its effectiveness does not rest entirely on whether or not everyone is enjoying it.

Too often, however, we use this as an excuse to avoid facing up to the hard work of putting on good liturgy. Sometimes (and this is true of liturgists, both young and old, liberal and conservative) we administer the liturgy the way medicine is administered to infants: They may not like it, but it's good for them.

Don't Surprise Us

A college basketball game was on TV and the score was tied with 40 seconds to go. Time-out was called and the coaches huddled with their players. The cameras move in on one of them and you could see him working feverishly on a clipboard sketching out plays. The microphone picked up some of the last minute instructions: "Give them some air until they get to the 10-second line, then throw the press at 'em. The strong side forward will sag into the middle. We'll rotate to isolate one of the guards. If an isolated guard can get this man one-on-one, low post him. The most important thing is the transition ..."

The TV commentator was Al Maguire, the great former coach at Marquette University. The other announcer asked Al what he told his team in similar situations. "Well," he said, "I use to tell them a lot during practice. But in those last seconds of the game, I simply said, 'Put the ball in the hoop—and don't surprise me in the process.'"

The liturgy is something like that. It is really a time of basics, not surprises. Planners of liturgy sometimes feel they have to create dramatic scenes to capture people's attention or to make the appropriate impact. Well, it *captures the attention* right, and it makes an impact, but I'm not so sure the overall effect is good.

For example, I heard about an incident when the unsuspecting congregation had their teeth jarred. The Gospel was Mark's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Beforehand, a member of the parish team had been placed in the balcony. When in the Gospel Jesus announced, "The reign of God is at hand," he suddenly screamed at the top of his voice, "REFORM YOUR LIVES!" (See Mk 1:15.)

Imagine some poor fellow sitting in that church fairly attentively—someone who is sort of a quiet person by nature. All of the sudden he hears this scream from nowhere, and it comes with such a shock he doesn't even hear what is being said. When he does figure out what happened, he's so rattled he can't concentrate on anything for the next 20 minutes.

The planning team thought it was terrific. I'd be interested to know what the people thought.

Generally speaking, the liturgy is not the time for surprises. Planners keep forgetting that we're already dealing with very powerful words and actions. They don't need tricks to come alive.

I don't mean that liturgy has to be dull routine. Creative efforts are needed constantly. It's just that they shouldn't come as a *surprise*. People should be told beforehand what to expect rather than deliberately caught off guard.

The Pleasure of Predictability

Another way of putting all this is that the congregation should be treated to the "pleasure of predictability." In the days of radio, we always knew what to expect down *Allen's Alley* or when Fibber McGee opened his closet. On TV it was predictable how Ralph Cramden, Alice and Norton would interact on *the Honeymooners*. We enjoyed it thoroughly. The same is true of successful contemporary shows. Because we know what to expect, we are ready for it when it happens and we put more of ourselves into it. There is a certain pleasure in predictability.

The same principle has an application in liturgy. Why is it that people so often say, "When are the changes going to settle down so that things aren't different from parish to parish, or even from Mass to Mass in our own parish?" Are they saying this because they want to return to ridged uniformity in every detail?

I don't think so. I think they are simply asking for the pleasure of predictability. And they are doing it for good reasons, not bad ones.

The Mass is meant to be an experience in which we can all share. To put ourselves into it, we have to know what is going to take place. We can't be on the edge of our seats trying to follow a series of unexpected prayers and actions.

A short while ago I went to Stratford and saw Shakespeare's *Richard II and Henry IV*. On the way there our group read over the plays and talked about them. This prepared us to enjoy them—which we did. When you are dealing with good material, know in advance what is going to happen is not boring. It is enriching.

One of the values of a structured ritual is that the participants are given more freedom. If the priest who presides can make everything up, the participants are forced to adopt *his* particular mood and follow *his* prayers—to adapt themselves to the ritual *he* has chosen to create.

On the other hand, if there is a structured ritual expressing very basic mysteries, there is room for everyone to fit in no matter what their mood. One person can be happily celebrating a promotion; another can be grieving over the loss of a family member. Both can find room for their prayers within the same ritual.

If the liturgy, however, is a series of unexpected prayers and spontaneous actions (spontaneous, that is, on the part of the presider), then the burden falls on the participants. They have to stay on their toes, shuffle their feelings around to try to relate to something they didn't know was coming. There is something manipulative about surprises. There is freedom in predictability.

Those who plan and lead liturgies should have a deep appreciation of this fact. It is not *their* prayer. It is the prayer of the Church. The people—the Church—have a right to that.

We can't have surprises every week or every month and expect people to be more than spectators. Every detail doesn't have to be the same, but we need recognizable guideposts. We need the pleasure of predictability.

Let the Mass Be Very Incomplete

We've all met people who just can't tell a story without including a thousand extraneous details. "Let me tell you what Ben told me yesterday at the drugstore. I went there to get a prescription filled—you know, the one for my sore back. It's a little better, but I think I'm going to change doctors if it doesn't hurry along faster. This doctor is good, but I don't think this is his field. Martha told me about one she went to—you remember how bad her back was. Anyway, I met Ben. He was with Maria, but she used to go with George—oh, what is his

name? Remember? He's the fellow who used to have a beard. His name is on the tip of my tongue. It'll come to me. Anyway, I met Ben ..."

That's where the story started. You haven't gotten anywhere yet and you know it will go on forever, packed with details that have nothing to do with the point of the whole story.

There is something inside of us pushing us to be complete, to include everything. Usually we overcome the temptation or we'd never get anything done. When we fail—well, that is how sermons get long, or our Prayers of the Faithful go on and on. That is also why our personal prayers are sometimes cluttered. We want to include everyone and everything.

One of the problems with the Mass is that it is often cluttered. We try to include comments along the way on the theme, all three readings, the feast, the parish programs going on that week.

No single prayer, no single celebration can include everything. Each says something, but not everything. It is a great virtue, but requiring tremendous effort, to leave things out.

Jesus is the Messiah. We aren't. We have to leave a lot to him, which means we have to be willing to be incomplete. He has the world in his hands, and we don't have to try to carry it ourselves.

There will be other Masses. We have to leave many things for other celebrations and allow each Mass to be very incomplete. We should take a cue from the great architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who once said, "Less is always more."

At each Mass, there is far more to be said than could ever be said and expressed in one celebration. We should try to do only a little bit (realizing that it is actually a great deal) and leave the rest in the Lord's hands. If we could only do that, we would discover a rich simplicity that is very powerful.

The failure to appreciate the need for simplicity is often evident when people plan special liturgies. They are (understandably) like the inexperienced preacher who wants to include everything from Adam to the end of the world. They collect all the good things they've seen done and want to make them part of the Mass, not realizing that they cannot possibly in one ceremony the top ten ideas of the year.

The attempt to plan a Mass around a theme can present problems in this regard. We try to explain the theme all through the Mass, and it can get suffocating.

Actually, every Mass has only one theme: the death and resurrection of the Lord. Within that theme, we can have particular emphases, but these shouldn't be overdone.

I don't think it's fair to force a theme on people. They always have a right to the basic theme of Christ's death and resurrection and they may want to stay with that rather than with a special emphasis we have chosen. For one reason or another, they may not be able to identify with the one we've chosen. Perhaps they are struggling with a major setback in their own life and they simply want to pray the most basic meaning of the Mass. Liturgical planners must respect that and leave room within the theme's development for simply touching God.

Now that there is more room for flexibility and ad-fibbing in the Mass, we have to watch out for the danger of trying to force one theme or trying to say too much. It takes a certain amount of restraint and asceticism to do this – an essential part of good liturgical leadership.

Simplicity—Not Clutter

A footnote on all this might be a comment about cluttered sanctuaries and altars. Even there we have to face up to the fact that we cannot include everything. To leave something out is not to say that in itself it is unimportant—or even less important than other things that are there. It is simply to say that it doesn't belong here and now.

To decide that a picture of our Lord doesn't belong in every room in your house is not to say that our Lord is unimportant. In the same way, even though it is one of our most cherished treasures, the tabernacle does not really belong on the altar or in the center of the sanctuary. The same is true of statues and many other liturgical decorations. Simplicity requires asceticism.

Even more out of place are those other things that can so easily clutter sanctuaries: large and conspicuous microphones, announcement books, lamps, missal stands. The altar is a supper table, not a sideboard, and the meal is bread and wine. Nothing else should interfere.

When it comes to "incomplete" we could learn a lesson from the Lord himself. Imagine all the things he could have said at any point—for example, when he was asked the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Books have been written on that question. What did our Lord say? He told a simple story and it is one of the most powerful parables of all: the parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:25-37). There is a lot more to say on the subject, but he was content to give us something less than everything.

We should follow his example in every Mass.

A Space for Silence

There is a lot of noise in today's world. Some is welcome—a child's laugh, a pretty song, the sincere words of a friend. Some is annoying—sirens, endless clichés, radios with the volume too high, snowmobiles interrupting a quiet winter's night.

Whatever the quality, there is more noise in our lives than ever before. There is too much noise.

No small wonder, then, that silence has increased in value. Just watch the advertisements and see the emphasis on peace, tranquility, the quiet ride, the stillness of the countryside.

Silence is beautiful. It can be improved upon with the right combination of sounds, but that is not an easy thing to do. Silence has a lot going for it all on its own.

Which brings the whole question of silence in the liturgy. The first prerequisite for anyone who leads or plans liturgy should be a deep appreciation of the value of silence. Sound is not an end in itself. And that is not easy.

We need space for prayer, for reflecting. For readiness to listen or to speak; and silence gives us space. I do not mean a complete lack of sound, I mean a freedom from unpleasant sounds, or from sounds to which we are to pay close attention—sounds that intrude themselves upon us. Background music—instrumental or sung by a choir—can give us space, as long as we are not supposed to listen to every word or every note.

The new liturgy calls for such spaces at various points in the Mass. The congregation has a right to moments of silence, but is often denied them. One of the best contributions we can make toward the spirituality of our people is to provide some quiet spaces for them in the Mass.

I am not suggesting that Sunday Masses be silent. I am simply saying that any sound has to be able to justify itself as an improvement on silence.

It makes quite a bit of difference if you begin with the presumption that silence is good. If you view silence as a blank sheet of paper that is supposed to be filled, then you are putting a premium on sound. If, on the other hand, you see silence as something beautiful, then you can interrupt it only when you have something better.

Take the homily for example. If the preacher is working from the first point of view (a blank spot to be filled), he asks himself how he will “fill” these 10 minutes. If, on the other hand, he approaches it from the point of view that silence is not evil, he continues only for as long as his words are an improvement on silence. If on a given Sunday that happens to be only three minutes, then three minutes it will be.

Congregational singing is another example. Some musical directors treat a silent moment like nature treats a vacuum: They abhor it. They have to put in a hymn. That is backwards. Silence is not emptiness. It is the singing, not the silence, that needs to be justified. Instead of beginning by asking *which* hymn to sing at this or that point of the Mass, they should ask if a hymn would be an improvement on silence. And they should remember that improvement on silence is not an easy thing to do.

Lectors should take heed. It’s not as though the congregation is unable to read the Scriptures to themselves. In the Mass, however, the Word is supposed to be proclaimed because the spoken word can be much more powerful.

But those who read should have a deep respect for the silence they replace. They should remember, “The people could read this to themselves. The only reason I’m reading it instead is to allow it to be powerful. I’d better make sure I do.”

What all this amounts to is simply reversing the perspective: looking from silence at sound instead of beginning with sound. Such perspectives could produce challenging sermons, inspiring music and powerful readings – plus now and then, a few golden moments of silence.

The End of Mass

A year or so I planned a four-day golf trip to northern Michigan with two of my brothers and a couple of friends. I was going to leave a day later than the others and one of my brothers said he knew someone who would fly me up in a private plane simply for the price of the gasoline. Arrangements were made before I thought to ask my brother why this fellow would do it so cheaply. “Simple,” he said. “He needs the practice.”

Well, the takeoff couldn’t have been smoother, and the two hour flight was fine too. But the landing! It was dark by the time we approached a small airport (just a field) and the wind was blowing off the lake. We came in a bit too steep and a bit too “sideways” and the pilot was frantically trying to keep control. We kept bouncing each time we hit. It was a harrowing experience.

Endings are important, and they are sometimes harder than beginnings. That is often true in sermons. Some are saved by a good ending or ruined by a bad one.

The ending of the Mass often gets the least attention in our planning and, as a result, comes off jumbled and hurried. It seems a shame to end an important celebration that way.

One of the problems is that the “break” between the Communion Rite and the dismissal gets lost in the shuffle. The Communion rite is supposed to be “rounded off” nicely by some quiet reflection and then a prayer. In my experience, this seldom happens.

For one thing, the announcements get in the way. They are supposed to take place *after* the Communion Rite. Usually, however, they are moved up so they actually cut into the Communion Rite, which confuses everything.

In proper sequence, the Communion rite consists of the Lord’s Prayer, the Sign of Peace, the Lamb of God, the distribution of Communion, a period of quiet reflection, and the Postcommunion Prayer. The Dismissal Rite includes the announcements, the last blessing and the dismissal.

The Postcommunion Prayer rarely comes off as a quiet wrap-up of our Communion reflection. Instead, it seems to be a last-minute send-off—part of the dismissal. There are several reasons for this: Too often there is no silent Communion reflection to wrap up. The announcements are frequently inserted before the Postcommunion Prayer. And the congregation is asked to stand for the Postcommunion Prayer. This change of posture gives the impression of a shift to a new part of the Mass.

I have a simple suggestion that would help straighten out some of the confusion. Have the congregation remain seated during the Postcommunion Prayer. This would have several advantages:

- Quiet reflection after Communion would be encouraged. The people would be seated for the prayer, so why not be seated a little beforehand?
- The prayer would be seen for what it is: a wrap-up to the Communion rite. We would all sit in reflection and when the presider said, “Let us pray,” we would sit there and finish off our reflection together in this prayer. (The content of the prayer, if you check a few samples, makes much more sense in this context. It is not a send-off.)
- The announcements would then follow more easily. The people are already seated, ready to listen.
- The Dismissal Rite would be seen as a separate ceremony. We would stand for a final blessing and then a farewell: “The Mass is ended. Let us go forth in peace.”

It does seem worth a try.

The Announcements for Today are....

I mentioned the announcements in passing, and now I'd like to make a few comments about them.

One senses that people wish we could do without announcements. There is always a collective sigh of relief on those rare occasions when the commentator says, "Today, there are no announcements." Why, then do we have them? Probably because those with a vested interest in the things announced push very hard for them. The religious education leaders, for example, desperately want registration information to be announced on the appropriate Sunday. Even though it is the parish bulletin, the response is better when there is an announcement at Mass.

I'm not saying that we should announce such things, I am simply giving you the reason why we do. Perhaps if we didn't do it, parishioners would gradually get used to looking at the bulletin more carefully. Everyone would agree, I'm sure - until *their* particular project needed a boost.

I'd like to offer four guidelines that would help make the announcement more palatable:

1. Keep the number of announcements to an absolute minimum.
2. Keep each individual announcement as brief as possible.
3. In choosing and writing announcements, remember that you are still within the Mass and some things are just out of place. For example, "All the women who come to the fashion show on Wednesday will receive a coupon for a free pair of pantyhose."
4. Never, never editorialize. The people have already had one homily and they dread the moment when Father looks up from the prepared announcements and says, "I'd like to make a couple of brief comments on that."

Back in the Sacristy

So much for the announcements. I'd like now to comment on what happens when the procession reached the sacristy.

For many years a group of us played hockey together every Thursday night. Over the course of time I developed for myself the "30-minutes-after-the-game" rule. What it means is that after a bad game I won't say anything critical to one of my teammates until I have had 30 minutes to cool off.

How did I arrive at this rule? Very simple: In the frustration immediately after a bad performance I've said things I wish I hadn't. It always did much more harm than good. Even if my critical remarks were objectively true, the other person was hardly in a receptive mood to hear them. (Of course, it was even worse when I did it *during* a game.)

Better wait until I've had a chance to think, and the general atmosphere is more conducive to "constructive dialogue."

The same is true at the end of Mass. It is not the time for the priest to chew out the music director or the servers or the ushers. Nor is it time for the lector to complain about the lector schedule. Everyone needs some time to unwind a bit. Critical comments are very important, but those are precisely the things that should be taken up at regular meetings of the ushers, the lectors, the servers, etc. The sacristy after Mass is not the time and place for them.

Mind you, this often takes heroic patience. Sometimes it's all I can do from collaring the lector after Mass and letting him have it. But every time I've broken my "30-minute rule" I've later regretted it. It seems such a shame to end the Eucharist with a skirmish. It just isn't the time for such things—no more than the Thanksgiving dinner is the time to bring up an old argument about the silverware. The 30 minute rule is a good one.