

Sunday Liturgy Can Be Better

Practical Suggestions for Planners, Ministers
and People in the Pews
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Preface

I used to teach preaching, and one of the principles I gave the students is:
“Tell them something but don’t try to tell them everything.”

The following pages attempt to follow that principle.
They are not a complete treatment of Sunday
liturgies. They are not even a step-by-step
treatment.

They simply set forth some practical reflections I
hope will be helpful for anyone who has any
responsibility for the Sunday celebration,
especially members of parish worship
commissions.

It is my hope that I have put in writing thoughts
and sentiments that you already have within
you, and that by doing so I have helped you to give expression to them and to improve the
liturgies in your parish.



Introductory Thoughts

The late Archbishop Hallinan of Atlanta once told the story of a woman who came up to him and said she didn’t like the “new Mass.” He wanted to know what she meant so he asked some specific questions:

“Do you like having the Gospel read in English?”

“Oh, yes,” she responded.

“Do you like the altar turned around so you can see?”

“I like that,” she replied.

“Well,” he said, how about having the families bring up the gifts?”

“That’s good,” she said without hesitation. “We did it once and my children enjoyed it.”

He kept going. “The priest used to make a lot more Signs of the Cross and genuflections, some of them inevitably hurried. He also used to say a lot more prayers – at the foot of the altar, the Last Gospel, the prayers after Mass. Do you miss those?”

“No, I really can’t say that I do.”

“Well,” the archbishop finally said, “what do you mean when you say you don’t like the new Mass?”

“It’s those guitarists playing rock music and those women in pantsuits giving out Communion, and those commentators talking all the time, and trying to find the right page in the missalette and the hymnal ... ”

The basic changes in the Mass were fine. The problem was the *way* some of them were being done. I find the same to be true in talking to many people. If you talk about specific changes, they like them. If you talk about how they are done in this or that parish, you start to hear objections.

The following pages will deal more with the way liturgies are celebrated than with liturgical theory. I have not had advanced studies in liturgy and I write from the point of view of the average priest who presides at parish liturgies.

I should point out that my “research” has consisted almost exclusively of talking to “the people in the pews.” Also, a great deal of what I say is simply my opinion and is meant to be taken in that spirit. The average churchgoer is probably the best judge of the accuracy of my observations.

Before talking about such things as sermons, ushers, lectors, music, servers, crying children, and so forth, I would like to make a few general observations.

De Gustibus Non Disputandum

When discussing liturgy, that old saying (in Latin yet!) is one of the most helpful in all the world. Usually identified by just the first two words (*de gustibus*), it means, “You can’t argue about taste.” If someone likes red and another is wild about blue, there is no sense arguing as though one were right and the other wrong. It’s simply a matter of taste.

Liturgical discussions would benefit greatly if people agreed to accept each other's tastes as legitimate. If you like organ music and the other person likes guitar music, don't argue as though it were a question of right and wrong or even better or best. Both are legitimate (and classical) forms of music—even if one or the other doesn't suit your taste.

Taste, of course, should not be confused with quality. There is a place in the liturgy for a variety of tastes, but there is no place for poor quality. A guitar strummed like a ukulele doesn't belong—it's poor quality. The same would be true of organ-playing that reminds you of a roller rink.

It would help to begin liturgical discussions with this question: Are we talking about *taste*, or are we talking about *quality*? If it is simply a question of taste, be careful about making your own taste absolute. There is a world of difference between: "I don't like this" (taste) and "This is poorly done" (quality).

There should be plenty of room in the liturgy for a variety of tastes. Presiders and liturgical planners have an obligation to keep their own tastes in perspective and respond to the varied tastes of the congregation.

It Is Never Enough to Be Correct

Liturgy is supposed to communicate to real people. If it doesn't—no matter how correct it may be—it is a failure. To say that people *should* like it is to miss the whole point. It would be like speaking perfectly correct French to a group of Americans and grumbling because they don't understand your message.

My feeling is that we occasionally grow righteous about liturgical celebrations. We read the best books, use the best materials and stage a ceremony we think is wonderful—except that people don't like it. Saying, "But they should!" doesn't help. It is never enough just to be correct. Liturgy is communication, which means that it has to be more than correct. It has to do what it is meant to do: help people to pray.

Because we have a captive audience which usually knows less about liturgy than we do, we can easily be tempted to give them celebrations they *should* like and blame *them* if they don't.

Preparing a Good Liturgy Is Not an Easy Thing to Do

I am always amazed when people who have never planned a Mass before set about doing so as though anybody could do it. Because we see Mass celebrated so often, we think it is a very simple matter to put one together.

In reality, it takes a great deal of skill to plan (and celebrate) a liturgy. It involves careful consideration of many questions: There is a question of maintaining unity rather than throwing together “art pieces.” There is a question of timing—a time for singing, a time for listening. There is a question of getting in touch with the particular people who will participate and sustaining their interest for 45 minutes or more.

It is interesting to contrast the skill with which a couple plans their wedding reception and their lack of skill in planning their wedding liturgy. This is understandable, since they have much more experience in planning parties. In the reception plans they think about timing and good taste, appropriateness and quality. When it comes to planning the liturgy, however, they sometimes think they can simply put together any assortment of good ideas gleaned from other weddings. Questions such as appropriateness, unity of theme, or timing are easily overlooked.

We need to be more selective in choosing people to plan liturgies. They don’t necessarily have to have advanced liturgical decreed, but they should know the basic principles of Christian worship. Further, they should have some special skills, chief among which is the gift (I do not use the word lightly) of understanding people and knowing how to reach them.

Putting together a 45-minute celebration that will hold the attention of hundreds of people , engage their participation and be a genuine religious experience is no easy thing to do. It looks easy—so does the swing of a professional golfer—but it takes a great deal of know-how and effort. The failure to appreciate this is probably the single greatest reason why many Sunday liturgies simply do not come off as they should.

Goodwill: No Substitute for Skill

In liturgical leadership dedication and sincerity are no substitute for skillful exercise of various roles. I will repeat this principle frequently in the following pages. It is based on the fact that public ministries exist for the sake of others. Liturgical roles (leading music, reading, ushering, etc.) are not for self-fulfillment of the ministers. No matter how dearly people may want to exercise a specific ministry, no matter how dedicated they may be, if they’re not very good at it, they shouldn’t do it. Aptitude is every bit as important as the desire to serve.