

Especially for Priests

Let There Be Ritual

Even high school graduates not given a lot of formality would be very disappointed if the person presiding at their graduation came to the ceremony in casual dress and told them to come up and find their own diplomas in a heap on the table. Some moments in life are *special*. Their importance is expressed through a way of acting that is special in character – a way of acting that we call ritual.

We sometimes tend to identify ritual with excessive formality, rigidity, artificiality—court manners. Ritual can become like that, but it doesn't have to. All you have to do is think about Thanksgiving or Christmas in your own family. Those celebrations are surrounded with a great deal of ritual, but it doesn't make them stiff or wooden. In fact, ritual enhances and helps give them more warmth, more festivity, more importance.

There are other examples. When a young man gives his bride-to-be the engagement ring, he doesn't toss it to her like car keys. It is a very special moment and his actions reflect its significance.

Ritual doesn't have to be synonymous with stiffness.

Having said this, the truth of the matter is that it did cause stiffness in the celebration of the Mass. I was ordained in 1963, before there were any changes in the liturgy. As any priest from that era can tell you, we spent our last months in the seminary working very hard to practice saying Mass.

Every action was described in minute detail. For example, we were not simply directed to extend our arms in a prayerful gesture at certain times. The gesture was minutely prescribed: The hands had to be at the width of your shoulders, on a 45 degree angle, palms facing each other. And, as you recall, that was the way every priest did it. (If you belong to my era, stop for a moment and do it yourself according to the above directions. It will bring back a flood of memories.)

Even as simple a matter as turning a page in the missal was regulated carefully. During the Canon you placed your right hand on the altar, palm down just off the corporal, while you turned the page with your left hand. After the Consecration, however, the right hand was placed *on* the corporal.

There were also frequent bows (three kinds, ranging from a slight head bow to a full bow from the waist), Signs of the Cross, genuflections and *constant* prayers – some said silently, (although your lips had to move), some in a low voice, some aloud.

From beginning to end, every word and gesture was thoroughly regulated. The result was a certain woodenness.

The new liturgy took off the straitjacket and we were given a great deal of flexibility in word and gesture. I suppose it was predictable, but many of us overreacted. We wanted so much to avoid the stiffness and rigidity identified with what we thought was ritual that we ended up being casual, even sloppy. It was from one extreme to the other. The formalize “*Dominus vobiscum*” with arms scrupulously extended was replaced by a wave of the hand and “Hi folks.”

The liberation from prescribed rules affected other ministries as well. I mentioned earlier the way servers had gone from one extreme to the other—from the fearful synchronization of a drill team to the meandering of the playground. Lectors too have been affected. I’ve seen carry the book of Scripture (the Lectionary) under their arm like a schoolbook, walk to the lectern as though they were sauntering to the refrigerator and stand there reading with both hands in their pockets.

Even our handling of the Eucharist has sometimes lost any semblance of ritual. Remember all the genuflections and hand washings and solemnity involved in taking hosts out of the tabernacle and putting them back? Or the extraordinary care prescribed when a host was dropped. I am not suggesting that we go back to all of that. On the other hand, you have probably seen priests and other ministers of the Eucharist handle the ciborium like a bowl of popcorn. They haven’t lost their faith and they did not intend irreverence. Their mistake is that they have forgotten *ritual*.

In our reaction against the mechanical actions of the past we have neglected ritual. We sincerely intended to be more natural, personal, real, to avoid putting on airs. But we’ve become too casual. Whenever we deal with something whose richness is far beyond words to express, we need ritual—if only to say that we are aware of the magnitude of what lies before us.

Casualness is not only the ruin of ritual. Equally ruinous is someone who does everything carefully and correctly but has no “sense of ritual.” For example, picture the Memorial Acclamation right after the Concentration. The presider calls on everyone to proclaim their belief in this profound mystery; this is a ritual action. I heard one priest do it this way: “Let us proclaim the mystery of faith.” Then in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, “We’ll use proclamation number two on page 21 of the missalette.” It sort of kills the effect.

The Mass, from beginning to end, is a ritual action. Everyone, from the presider to the members of the congregation, has to keep this in mind.

It is good to be rid of suffocating directives. But still, let there be ritual.

Put Us at Ease

I served for six years in the clergy office of the Archdiocese of Detroit. Whenever people discovered that I had something to do with personnel they usually commented on the priest at their parish. Nine times out of ten they talked about the way he celebrated Sunday liturgy.

One of the best compliments about a priest was phrased in a way that I hadn't heard before. The speaker said: "When he says Mass, you feel at *ease*." Then she went on. He doesn't rush, but he doesn't drag either. He has a good sense of timing; he knows when to let things settle a bit and when to get things moving. He doesn't get all fussy or agitated when things aren't perfect—there's no flurry of signals, angry looks or stage whispers. He never gets tense, uptight, or worried."

"He always has a pleasant look, like he's at home up there."

"And he makes you feel comfortable. He is not domineering but he is clearly the leader, and you feel that you are in good hands. You can be peaceful and pray, leaving the worries to him. You remember how Bing Crosby always seemed to make everyone feel at ease? Or Perry Como? Well, he gives you the same kind of feeling."

The comparisons aren't perfect, but they say something. Those who have leadership roles in the liturgy—priests, ushers, lectors, musicians⁰¹⁵¹ should exercise their roles in a way that doesn't make the congregation apprehensive or on edge. You're familiar with the uneasy feeling I'm talking about. It's the feeling you have when there is an inept master of ceremonies at a banquet or when a high school youngster is struggling through a speech at school.

In one sense, the Mass is not meant to be an "easy" experience. It is heavy with the mystery of life and death. But that is just the point. Uneasiness about some of the external details can distract us from involvement in the deeper challenges that are there. We need leaders in liturgy who can help put us at ease so that we can settle into the depths of the mysteries being celebrated.

There isn't also the presider who tries so hard that the Mass is too intense.

One person described such a priest to me by saying that he works so hard to involve everyone in every single thing taking place (commenting as he goes along, intent looks, etc.)

that when the Mass is over you feel wrung out. The priest does this with the very best intentions. But too much attention seems to focus on his efforts. He doesn't appreciate the fact that his role is to facilitate, not force.

People need space so that *they* can freely put themselves into the mysteries of the faith. The presider cannot be clamoring every moment for their intense concentration.

Actually, people can at times participate very beautifully in the Mass by hanging onto a word or phrase from the readings, the homily or a hymn that struck home, by staying with a feeling that arose from within. They continue to be part of everything that is taking place, but one particular refrain remains the central focus. They are lost in some beautiful thoughts and do not want to let go of them, even though the Mass has moved on to something else.

This is a legitimate kind of prayer and a legitimate way to participate in the Mass. Leaders of liturgy should keep this in mind and not always assume that they themselves or what they are doing at a particular moment has to be front and center to everyone there. Liturgical leadership is meant to facilitate prayer, create the possibilities of prayer – not foist *our* pace of prayer on everyone.

It's not easy to be a good presider. Putting the people at ease is a good example of the complex skill required.

Preaching: Some Advice from the People

A few years ago I was asked to teach a course on preaching at St. John's Seminary in Plymouth, Michigan. My preparation for the course was an eye-opener for me. I bought a pocket-size notebook (Colombo style) and asked laypeople this question: "If you had two minutes to give advice to priests about preaching, what would you tell them?"

While they talked, I wrote. I sorted out the comments by categories and came up with 20 or more principles. These became the substance of my course. Eight comments were expressed most frequently:

1. *Stick with one thought.* This was far and away the comment repeated most—sometimes with vehemence. When I probed a bit to find out why people were so strong on this point I discovered that it was very simple: They just wanted to be able to take a thought home with them. It wasn't that they wanted to get the Mass over in a hurry. (We sometimes assume that motivation but what I found was quite different.)

If the homilist offers too many thoughts, one gets in the way of the other, no matter how good the thoughts may be. It's like eating. You really don't want pork chops after a steak (no matter how good the chops are), then roast duck after that, and then spaghetti, and so on.

Many people put it this way: “Our priest really has something good to say, and his homilies would be great if he ended it when he has made one good point. But he doesn’t. He moves on to a whole new thought, and then another—and when it’s over, I can’t remember anything he said.”

2. *Preach on the Scriptures we just heard.* It is frustrating to hear the priest launch into a talk that seems to take no account of what has just taken place. People expect some logical coherence in the liturgy. If the homilist suddenly changes direction, it is jarring. And by the time we catch up with him, they have lost the first half of his homily.
3. *Don’t take forever to end it.* When you’ve said what you wanted to say, stop. Don’t go around in circles repeating yourself or trying to summarize everything. Endless endings have been the ruin of many a good homily. People know when the priest is really finished with what he wanted to say, and he knows it too. But then he starts to repeat what he said. “And so, my dear people” They sit there and listen to him pass up three or four good endings, and then—the worst horror of all—a *new* thought occurs to him and he gets up steam and starts into it.
4. *Use everyday language.* Preachers usually know enough not to use technical terms or 50-cent words. The real problem is bland words, religious clichés, abstract words. People want “kitchen table language”—words that are concrete, real, graphic, normal—not pious jargon. Jesus had a knack for using images from everyday life, and his words hold their power over the centuries.
5. *Keep it short.* This was probably the second most repeated comment. Again, it’s deceptive. People who said this weren’t trying to hurry the Mass along. They just didn’t want any parts to be dragged out and boring. The longer the homily, the greater the risk of boredom.

How long is long? It’s hard to say, but nowadays, 15 minutes seems very long for a homily – and 20 minutes is very, very long. In this electronic age, 15 minutes of uninterrupted speaking by one person is unusual. If you turned on the television tonight, the odds are 100 to 1 against seeing *any* person speak for more than a minute without some break—for example, some film footage or a change of speaker.

6. *Use examples.* A picture is really worth a thousand words. Besides, when the homilist uses a good example, people can really make it their own and adapt it to their life.

7. *Make it personal.* The homily should be a heart-to-heart talk, not a lecture. Here are some of the comments on this one: “We’ve heard the Scriptures. Now we want to hear how they are part of *your* faith But remember, there is a difference between a personal sharing of faith (which we like) and chatty anecdotes about your dog, or the ball game you went to, or your last vacation (which we don’t like). Give us your faith.
8. *Don’t talk down to people.* It helps when the homilist includes himself in his audience, rather than preaching *at* them all the time. It helps to know that he has struggles and failings in his life too.

These comments seem to be pretty good advice. But they are hard to carry out. In the next chapter, we’ll talk about some of the difficulties in putting them into practice.

Preaching: What’s So Hard about It?

I forget which teams were playing, but it was the World Series quite a few years ago. Anyway, the game was tied in the ninth inning and a slugger was coming to bat. The manager walked out to the pitcher and told him (so he said later), “Whatever you do, keep the ball low, even if you have to walk him.” He was no sooner back in the dugout when the first pitch came letter high and the ball went sailing over the left field wall.

Sometimes you know what you want to do and end up doing the opposite. Preaching can be that way.

Preaching a homily is much more difficult than giving almost any other kind of talk. For one thing, it requires compression – trying to deal with colossal matters in a short space. Strange as it may seem, the more experience you have in giving homilies, the more difficult this becomes. You have more things to say and you feel more comfortable in front of an audience.

Another problem is the fact that the competition today is much tougher. Fifty years ago it was a pleasure to listen to any educated, articulate person. Nowadays we are exposed to the likes of Walter Cronkite every evening. And even he never has to talk for more than 30 seconds without assistance of color film or changes of scene. That is a fact of life, and it makes preaching much tougher.

The difference between writing most other talks and writing a homily is something like the difference between building a garage and a model ship. A great deal more fine work and discipline is involved in the latter.

It takes terrific discipline to stay within seven minutes (which is my personal preference). And it takes a careful eye on time; for the speaker a seven-minute space seems like two minutes.

There is so much to say on any given Sunday. Homilists often feel overwhelmed by the number of things they feel *obligated* to include. This came home to me one Sunday a while back when it seemed as though a hundred things *had* to be said.

The gospel was about giving to Caesar what is Caesar's; since it was around election time something had to be said about our obligation as citizens. We had talked about the missions the previous week, but the mission collection was being taken up that day and needed a nudge. A new pope had been elected. It was a turning point in the history of the Church and I could hardly omit any mention of it. The religious education program for youngsters was beginning; we had been asked to remind parents of their obligations. And the adult education program was starting that week. The organizers had worked very hard and would be crushed if we didn't support it by saying something.

Every week, if you are to be brief and stick to one thought, a lot of important things have to be left unsaid. I believe this has to be done, difficult as it is.

Not so long ago I was at a Mass in which the homily was given by someone who was not a priest. She was an excellent speaker and writer. She also had strong feelings on the poor quality of homilies, including length. She talked for 35 minutes - a great speech, but a terrible homily. It had no connection whatever with the Scripture readings, the thoughts were deep (profound) and the language abstract. She had worked very hard on it, but, like so many of us, she didn't realize that giving a short homily that flows from the Gospel and shares some heart-to-heart thoughts is not an easy thing to do.

Sometimes it is suggested that homilies are of poor quality because priests are 'out of it.' They don't experience such problems as raising children or paying off a mortgage. That's tempting as an answer and I once believed it. I don't anymore. Why?

Because in the past few years I have heard many non-priests give homilies - permanent deacons, religious education coordinators, parish council presidents, and so forth. These people are not "out of it;" they are raising families, holding down jobs, and involved in the same kind of life as their listeners. On the average their homilies are no different than priests': Some are very good, some are very poor. If we're looking for a reason why many homilies are poor, we'll have to look somewhere else.

On the whole, people are not satisfied with preaching. Making excuses for it does not help. We've got to find ways to improve.

On a positive note, homilists seem more concerned about homilies than in previous years. For one thing, homilies have become a more important part of the Mass. Also, homiletics is more and more based on the Scriptures. The cycle of readings is much better and the selections lend themselves to the kind of heart-to-heart talks that people want.

In ten years homilies will be much better if the people in the pews continue to offer feedback – and if homilists listen to them.