

## The *Real* Life vs. The *Ritual* Life



Dull incomprehension . . . it's the look in the eyes of a congregation that I dread as I try, with all earnestness, to lead the people in the Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass which encompasses the consecration of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. I think, *"maybe if I enunciate perfectly, and raise the volume of my voice a bit, and inject a bit of emotion into the text, I will be better able to engage the people in this prayer: Maybe I can keep their minds from drifting and losing focus on the act of worship at hand."*

**It's tempting to reduce the weekly celebration of Mass to my performance and your attention,** but this is too much of a reduction. First and foremost, the Eucharist and the Mass are the actions of God's grace through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit: And, of course, linked to this gift of grace is the faith that we bring with us. My effort to perform well and your effort to maintain a disciplined attention come in only after these two.

Of course, this is not to say that the efforts we put into our worship are meaningless: they should certainly be considered part of the response we make to the offer of grace through the gift of God's word, and the Sacrament of Holy Communion. If I preside over the celebration of Mass badly, or if you are terribly distracted, it is obvious that these will be obstacles to good prayer and receptivity to the gifts the Lord offers.

A more challenging question might arise in all of this as to whether "ritual worship," like the Mass, is too difficult for us or if this form is, itself, an obstacle to real prayer and praise. The obvious counter-example to it would be the boisterous, evangelical worship services you see on television, presided over by televangelists. People are up off their seats clapping their hands, the preacher moves about the stage, Bible in one hand, gesticulating

with the other, and expressing himself with all-dramatic fervor. Is that a better form of worship? Is it more sincere and/or heart-felt? I, for one, suspect that it has its own liabilities over the long haul: It seems likely to me that it may place too much emphasis on what a person feels or what a person "should" feel. It also seems to me that the emphasis on the preacher's skill or performance could easily eclipse people's consciousness of the action of grace, (a cult of personality).

In support of our own Sacred Tradition, a Catholic philosophy professor from Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, Michael Tkacz offers the following, helpful reflection: *"While free-lance prayer is good, we need the discipline of ritual, because prayer is a need and duty regardless of how we feel. Spontaneity in prayer is not nearly as important as steadfastness. I know of no passages in the Scripture which tell us to be spontaneous in prayer, but we are often urged to be steadfast. Also, we need the authority of ritual prayers that are properly formulated so that we are oriented to the truth of our need for God. We are not always the best judge of our needs, but God knows us better than we know ourselves"* (Adoremus.org).

In past articles I had suggested the notion of *"making the prayers your own,"* as a way of overcoming the obstacles to ritual repetition: As I consider the problem again, it occurs to me that following along with the missalette for a time might facilitate exactly that sort of personal engagement and a deepening of prayer. Like so many other important and meaningful activities in life, we need training: **This is the Mass! It is the whole Church's rehearsal for eternal life. . . participation in the life of the Risen Lord.**

