

Renewing Liturgy in the Post-Pandemic Parish

The state of affairs with regard to renewing the liturgy in the post-pandemic parish presents a number of challenges:

- 1) Do Catholics believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist?
- 2) Will parishioners come back to Mass in church after the pandemic?
- 3) Is it ever okay to deny Holy Communion to anyone?
- 4) Is the life of Jesus, nourished by the Eucharist, lived out after Mass?

One part of the equation is getting people into the pews so that we can address these challenges. As is often said, Sunday Mass is when we have the most potential to reach and teach the most people. But we don't have much control over getting people in the pews; that's ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit.

Whatever part we *do* play in that part of the equation – getting people into the pews – there are again challenges, because a lot of people today...

- 1) Prefer to have services delivered to them.
- 2) Expect access to services to be easy, quick, and brief.
- 3) Have priorities about time and money that don't correspond to Church.
- 4) May use affiliation as a statement for or against contemporary culture.
- 5) May reject Church teaching, or are scandalized by clergy sex abuse.

There isn't much we can do about *those* things either, especially when our Church places so much emphasis on the sharing of members' time and money in support of mission and ministry, and on gathering together.

I mean, people *need* to give time, talent and treasure for the sake of their own happiness and fulfillment, to say nothing of the benefit to others. Also, it's unattractive to meet virtually instead of *in-personally*, and unlikely that we'll make that move. And how else will we fulfill the Third Commandment: Keep holy the sabbath? It's right and just, our duty and salvation to gather together in church to worship God at Sunday Mass.

From the time of the apostles, Catholics have observed Sunday as the sabbath, to honor Jesus' resurrection. The Catholic Church teaches that we keep the day holy by doing good deeds, avoiding unnecessary work, and gathering together for Mass after 4 pm on Saturday, or any time on Sunday.

In addition, to show how important Sunday Mass is for the practice of our Catholic Faith, the Church made a law that says it's a sin to miss Mass if you could go, but you choose not to go, and you do something else instead.

For serious reasons, a bishop can dispense from the so-called Sunday obligation, giving Catholics permission to be absent from Sunday Mass in church. It's also possible to excuse ourselves, no sin involved, for legitimate reasons, for example: we're frail from age or illness; we're caring for the sick, homebound, or an infant; we've no way of getting to the church; weather makes travelling dangerous; work and Mass schedules conflict.

Once we're in the pews, after Mass starts, first thing out of the gate we're invited to prepare to celebrate the sacred mysteries by acknowledging our sins. That seems like a Debbie Downer moment, don't you think?

Some people say that this is like a quick examination of conscience and a quasi-Confession and absolution, you know, so we're all clean-like to offer worship and receive Communion. Maybe. But the Penitential Rite can't absolve from mortal sin, and the Church teaches that venial sins are forgiven by the reception of the Eucharist. I guess it's possible that we could commit other venial sins before the distribution of Communion – thinking evil thoughts about the preacher – but otherwise it seems the Penitential Rite has a different purpose.

In my opinion (and so, it must be true), what we acknowledge is instead a basic faith fact. Here's what goes through my head during the Penitential Rite: I am a sinner. I need a savior. I have a savior, Jesus. His mercy is greater than all my sins. I receive mercy even though I am undeserving. I am full of thanksgiving and praise.

And *then*, with that acknowledgement, we're ready to celebrate sacred mysteries, which is also called a sacrifice of praise, or the Liturgy of the Eucharist, which is from the Greek word for thanksgiving.

It seems natural, doesn't it, that the Penitential Rite is followed by the praise and thanksgiving of the Gloria. In fact, when (not if) I'm Pope, we'll use the Gloria even during Advent and Lent, except the Gloria from the Mass of Christ our Savior, which I call the Lenten Gloria, because it's such a *penance!* to sing it; that one will be outlawed by Pope Jackels.

Prepared to offer a sacrifice of praise in a liturgy of thanksgiving, we then proceed to participate fully, consciously, and actively at Holy Mass.

That is expressed first and most importantly by our self-gift to God. Our gift is made in response to hearing the story, in the Readings and homily, of the many self-gifts humanity receives from God, such as creation, providence, and redemption. This back-and-forth gift-giving is called the holy exchange of gifts, which is an ancient name for the Mass.

Our self-gift to God, which is spiritual and made from the heart, is also expressed concretely by putting our hand in the collection basket to offer money, or a pledge of service, or time in prayer. The gifts contributed by the congregation to represent our self-gifts are then collectively symbolized in the bread and wine in the offertory procession, placed on the altar.

That's why the priest, after preparing the bread and wine at the altar, refers to them as "my sacrifice and yours." And also why, in Eucharistic Prayer III, the priest refers to our self-gift, collectively symbolized in the consecrated bread and wine, as our oblation, our sacrifice-like-Christ, given freely, without counting the cost, and generously.

When the priest invokes the Holy Spirit and repeats Jesus' words from the Last Supper, in a spiritual way the bread and wine become Jesus' Body and Blood. Soul and Divinity. At that moment, the sacrifice that Jesus made on Calvary Hill, his self-gift to the Father

for our redemption, is made mystically present on the altar. The Eucharist is a great mystery, not like a who-done-it novel, but as something the human intellect can't fully understand, yet we believe because Jesus taught it.

The Eucharist is a memorial of Jesus' self-gift, an object of our worship, but mostly Jesus wants to give himself to us as food, medicine, and comfort.

Full, conscious, and active participation at Mass is also practiced in receiving the Eucharist. When we go to Holy Communion, we aren't eating flesh and drinking blood in a physical sense. At the same time, the Eucharist is more than just a mere symbol; it's actually somewhere in between. We call the Eucharist a real symbol: it is what it signifies, namely, the very life of Jesus. It's called the Real Presence, a substantial presence, and is the reason why we bow, genuflect and kneel to Jesus who is present in the Eucharist, even after Mass, reserved in the tabernacle.

Jesus at the Last Supper, holding bread and wine in his hands, might've said: This is me. Wheat is ground to bake bread, which is the staff of life. Grapes are crushed to make wine, for our hearts to be merry. If they could be asked, wheat and grapes wouldn't mind. They might say: It's my happiness and fulfillment to be ground and crushed, to become the staff of life, and to make hearts merry. I live to give life and joy to others.

Jesus doesn't mind either. No one takes my life from me, Jesus says, I lay it down freely. It is for this that I have come. I live to give life and joy to others. Nor should Jesus' followers mind, who hear the Master say that, if we want to save our lives, we have to lose our lives in service and sacrifice. We too live to give life and joy to others.

So, at Mass, when we hold the Host and the Chalice in our hands, we say: Amen, this is Jesus. But after consuming this spiritual food and drink that nourishes our life in Christ, we can also say about ourselves: This is me, Jesus. My life is hidden now with Christ, in God. I have no other life now but Christ who lives in me. I continue the mission of Jesus in the ministries of the Church. I live to give life and joy to others.

Catholics are obliged to receive Holy Communion at least once a year, during the Easter season. But we ideally receive Holy Communion whenever we go to Mass; it's the culmination of our full, conscious and active participation.

It's important for us to prepare to receive Holy Communion worthily, that is, with a clean conscience and a properly disposed soul:

- 1) Fast for an hour before Communion time from anything but water and medicine (not obliged if we're sick, elderly, or caring for the like);
- 2) Make an examination of conscience;
- 3) Confess to a priest if we're aware of being guilty of mortal sin.

With regard to that – aware of being guilty of mortal sin – the Church says that if we find ourselves in that unhappy state, and yet we feel a serious spiritual need to go to Communion, but it's not possible to confess to a priest beforehand, we can go ahead and receive the Eucharist worthily after saying sorry to God out of love for God, and promising to confess to a priest as soon as that's possible.

That's because, as Pope Francis is wont to say, the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine, the balm of Gilead for a sin-sick soul. The missal has prayers at Communion time that call the Eucharist a healing remedy, healing for the soul, a healing for eternity. As mentioned already, the Church teaches that receiving Communion can bring about spiritual healing of absolving venial sins, as well as helping us to stay away from mortal sins.

The possibility to receive Holy Communion without the benefit of Confession beforehand goes along with how the laws of the Church are supposed to be interpreted: when a grace is given, like Holy Communion, it's interpreted liberally; when a penalty is administered, like denying someone the Eucharist, it's interpreted narrowly. For example, in order to legitimately deny the Eucharist to someone accused of "persevering obstinately in manifest grave sin," it has to be proved that the behavior is sin, grave sin, manifest grave sin, and that the person is persevering obstinately in that sin. Any ambiguity in this regard is always decided in favor of the accused.

Finally, our full, conscious, and active participation continues after Mass, outside of church, on weekdays, at home, school, or work, wherever we live our lives. The Dismissal at the end of Mass isn't just a way to signal that the Mass is over; you can leave now. Rather, we are *commanded* to go: *Ite, missa est*. You who are transformed by Holy Communion, you are sent to continue the mission of Jesus in the ministries of the Church, to be an agent to transform the world into the Reign of God, especially by loving service to the poor.

Service to the poor is called the practice of a pure and faultless religion. The love behind it can forgive even a multitude of sins, the Bible says, and can preserve us in holiness until the day we meet the Lord. And about that day, Jesus says he will judge us on whether or not we helped the poor: those who do will enjoy Heaven; those who don't, won't.

We can even quicken the coming of Jesus by our holiness of life, that is, by the love that inspires our service to the poor. So, when it can be said of us what was said of Jesus' followers in the time of the Apostles, that no one among them was in need, then the Reign of God will be complete, and Jesus will come on the clouds.

That being said, service and sacrifice are hard. The teaching of Jesus in this regard may not be enough in and of itself to move us from me to thee. But the Holy Eucharist give us Grace, which is a share in Divine Goodness (and Wisdom, and Strength), that transforms us to live for, give to, help out, share with, serve, even sacrifice for the benefit of others after the heart of Jesus. And what's more, to be surprised by how much transcendent joy is experienced by giving, by losing our life for the Gospel.

There it is, the way to renew our celebration of the liturgy in our post-pandemic parishes: from heart to hand, from hand to basket, from basket to bread, from bread to Body, from Body to food, from food to life, living to give life and joy to others.

At the beginning of this reflection, some areas of concern were identified:

- 1) Do Catholics believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist?
- 2) Will parishioners come back to Mass after the pandemic?
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4) Is the life of Jesus nourished by the Eucharist lived out after Mass?

An additional way to address these concerns, besides the practice of hospitality, hymns, homily and how we worship, is the prayer practice called Eucharistic Adoration, also known as *The Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery Outside Mass*.

This prayer practice doesn't take anything away from our participation at Mass; instead, it leads people to it. For example, a photo of a loved one keeps the flame of relationship alive, and increases the desire to be with the beloved. Likewise, with regard to Eucharistic Adoration, it can never be enough just to look at Jesus; there's also the desire to share life with him, that is, to receive Holy Communion, nourishing the life of Christ we received at Baptism, and then to live that life in service to the poor.

This devotion can be practiced by making the Sign of the Cross, or bowing your head, or saying the name of holy name of Jesus when driving by a church. Or you can stop in the church for a quick genuflection. Or you can stay longer to kneel in adoration before the tabernacle, or before the Blessed Sacrament exposed in a monstrance on the altar. We do any and all of these practices because we believe that Jesus is really present in the Eucharist, even outside of Mass.

At Adoration, we can think of Jesus looking at us as he did the crowds, with compassion for how we are helpless, hassled, and in need of healing. And we look at Jesus, in an unspoken prayer for something we want or need, or to see if we whether Jesus is reflected in us. Can we say: I live to give life and happiness to others?