

Elements of the Liturgy: Part 1

Introduction

Sunday worship, as many of you know, is much more than simply an “obligation” placed upon us or a boring hour that has no meaning outside of church. Rather, it is the “summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed... the font from which all her power flows” (SC 10). We usually call it “Mass” (or *missa* in Latin which means, “dismissal,” implying our mission to go forth—be dismissed—to love and serve the Lord... we go to Mass in order to be dismissed/sent forth to do the work of God!), but the Church more often uses the term Liturgy.

Liturgy comes from the Greek word *leitourgia* meaning “public work.” You see, the Liturgy has a 2-fold movement: 1. God toward Humanity (through his works of salvation throughout history... God calls us to Himself), and 2. Humanity toward God (our response to this call through faith). The Liturgy is our public response to God’s call. We acknowledge our sinfulness, listen to and take in God’s Word, present ourselves as gift to the table, witness the transformation of these gifts and receive them back as Christ (Eucharist), and are then sent forth renewed and transformed for the benefit of the world around us.

In order to accomplish all the above, the modern liturgy of is made up of several elements: Biblical Word, Architecture/Visual Art, Time, Physical Gesture, Silence, Community, Material Mediations, and of course, Music. Over the next several weeks, we are going to take a close look at each of these essential elements.

Elements of the Liturgy: Part 2

“Biblical Word”

So important to Sunday worship is the “Word” that we call the first half of mass the “Liturgy of the Word.” This practice finds its roots in the Jewish synagogue.

After Solomon’s Temple (their center of worship and God’s presence) was destroyed by the Babalonians and the Israelites became exiled from the promised land, the invention of worship in a synagogue came into being as a survival mechanism meant to teach and transmit the corporate memories of the nation. Survival came through remembering the events of the past that made them a special people, God’s people. They read their history (scripture) rejoiced (psalms), prayed, and reflected (sermon). Much like individuals of today look to a family photo to understand their family identity, the Israelites looked to their ancestor’s history to understand their relationship to God, not just in the past, but in the present and always.

Today, the Catholic Church places great importance on knowing our family history (experiences of Israel and Early Church—Old & New Testaments). The scriptures come to life each week (OT reading, Psalm, Epistle, Gospel) and we are taught how to live a life of Christ, in today’s world (Homily). We profess our faith as a Universal Church (Creed) and pray for God to intercede in our suffering world (Petitions). It is important for each of us to prepare our hearts and minds for the lessons of scripture week to week. I encourage you, if you don’t already, to read the Sunday readings before coming to mass each week and to prepare yourself to be slowly transformed:

www.usccb.org/nab/

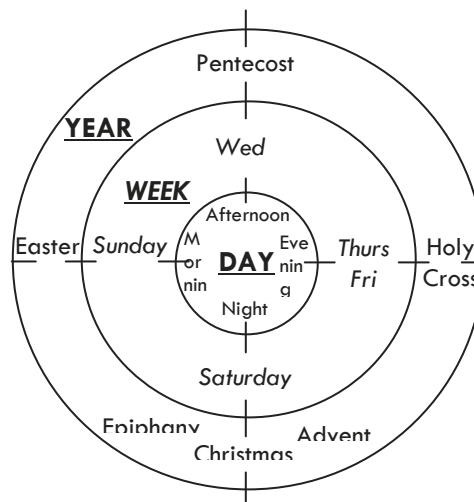
Elements of the Liturgy: Part 3 **“Architecture & Visual Art”**

In a course on Liturgy at Creighton University, my class and I took trips to various churches around town. Our objective was to see if what we saw in their architecture matched what was practiced in their worship. The idea is that the building helps “define the meaning of worship for those gathered inside it” (White, 82). Worship is much different at St Leos than it is at the Cathedral due largely to the design of the worship space. In fact, since the worship space itself is a musical instrument, even choices of music are effected since different music works better in different spaces. Choices of art, where the altar and ambo (lectern) are, how cold, comfortable, quiet or loud the space is, *what kind of pews are used and how they are situated...* and much more all have an effect on one’s worship experience. When speaking of liturgical art, “art used in worship,” one must consider that its prime function is “to bring us to an awareness of the presence of the holy, to make visible that which cannot be seen by ordinary eyes” (White, 104). We are blessed at Leos in that we have an array of beautiful icons throughout our commons and worship space. When you come to mass next week, keep in mind how the space itself profoundly effects your worship experience.

White, J. F. (2000). *Introduction to Christian Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Elements of the Liturgy: Part 4 **“Time”**

To us as human beings living on earth here and now, nothing can exist without the gift of time. Everything happens within the realm of time, including the incarnation/death/resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ 2000 years ago. Therefore, time can be seen as a sacred element of our lives. The Liturgy (including the liturgy of the hours) continually follows 3 Cycles of Time which each celebrate the Paschal Mystery—the Year, the Week, and the Day:



Hopefully you can read the chart above. The basic idea is that we move from darkness/death (evening/Fri/Feast of Holy Cross), to anticipation (night/Sat/Advent), to resurrection/life (morning/Sun/Easter), and then are called to discipleship/seeing the light (afternoon/Wed/Pentecost). Notice that Pentecost is celebrated near the longest day of the year (summer solstice) and the afternoon is when the sun reaches its daily peak. Lucky for us, our ancestors were intimately wedded to time and fit very neatly its role into the mystery that is our church.

Elements of the Liturgy: Part 5 ***“Physical Gesture”***

In the celebration of Mass we raise our hearts, minds and voices to God, but we are creatures composed of body as well as spirit and so our prayer is not confined to our minds, hearts and voices, but is expressed by our bodies as well. When our bodies participate in our prayer we pray with our whole person.

During Mass we assume different postures: standing (sign of respect/honor), kneeling (sign of adoration today – penance in early church), sitting (listening/meditation), and we are also invited to make a variety of gestures (sign of the cross, exchange of peace, bowing during Creed commemorating the Incarnation, bowing before receiving Eucharist, and striking the breast during the Confiteor). These postures and gestures are not merely ceremonial. They have profound meaning and, when done with understanding, can enhance our personal participation in Mass. In fact, these actions are the way in which we engage our bodies in the prayer that is the Mass.

The Church also sees in these common postures and gestures as both a symbol of the unity of those who have come together to worship and a means of fostering that unity. When we stand, kneel, sit, bow and sign ourselves in common action, we give unambiguous witness that we are indeed the Body of Christ, united in heart, mind and spirit.

Based upon Roman Missal Formational Materials provided by the Secretariat for the Liturgy of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "2002.

Elements of the Liturgy: Part 6 ***“Silence”***

“In addition to the symbols, words, gestures, and music which together constitute the liturgy, there is **silence**. In the context of the liturgy, silence may be viewed as an activity of the gathered assembly... an expression of [their] corporate attentiveness to the word of God proclaimed in the scriptures, and of [their] receptivity to the Spirit present in the celebration of Christ’s mysteries in memory and in hope” (Downey),

Many of us use this silence in mass for private prayer or meditation, but rather, we should look to it as that “dimension which enables the person and community to be brought more fully into the mystery of Christ’s presence celebrated in liturgy” (Downey).

Silence does not have the same function at every point in which it is observed. Rather, “its purpose... depends on the time it occurs in each part of the celebration. Thus within the Act of Penitence and again after the invitation to pray, all recollect themselves; but at the conclusion of a reading or the homily, all meditate briefly on what they have heard; then after Communion, they praise and pray to God in their hearts” (General Instruction of the Roman Missal, or GIRM, 45). Silence is so important to the mass that the GIRM speaks of it 18 different times. Silence, though, is difficult to appreciate in our noisy 21st Century American culture. The effect of modern culture is seen even in liturgies at St Leos. We sometimes rush through the silence because it feels as though nothing is being accomplished. It feels almost uncomfortable if the lector does not start toward the pulpit right after the cantor has finished the psalm. It seems we must rediscover this important element of the Liturgy.

Downey, Michael. "Silence, Liturgical Role Of." Peter E. Fink, S.J. *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990. 1189.

Elements of the Liturgy: Part 7 ***“Community”***

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL), document of the Second Vatican Council, describes for us the fourfold presence of Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist. Christ is present in “the species of bread and wine that becomes the Lord’s body and blood, in the minister leading the community in prayer, in the word proclaimed and preached, and in the gathered assembly” (Scirghi). Many of us forget that “where two or three are gathered together in my [Jesus] name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20). In the liturgy, then, “the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ... by the Head [priest representing Christ] and its members [the assembly]” (CSL 7c).

The term “assembly” (the gathered liturgical community) was revived by the council, but their place in the liturgy as one of the ways Christ is present in the liturgy has not been explored as much as the other three (Eucharist, Presider, Word). It is important for us to realize our significance within the liturgy. Our very presence enables Christ’s presence. Our participation glorifies God and sanctifies ourselves. However, when we do not participate (fully and actively), or when we do not even come, Christ’s presence to us and the world is lessened. St Leo’s has a wonderful community of believers, and through acts of community (weekly mass, pancake breakfasts, festivals, dinners, dances, etc), we continue to build this very real presence of Christ.

Thomas Scirghi, S. (2010). The Presence of Christ in the Gathered Assembly. *Pastoral Liturgy* , 41 (3), 18.

Elements of the Liturgy: Part 8 ***“Music”***

“Write out this song, then, for yourselves,” God said to Moses. “Teach it to the Israelites and have them recite it, so that this song may be a witness for me” (Deut 31:19).

Music is a gift from God, a mysterious part of humanity in which the ethereal can seem almost tangible. It is “a cry from deep within our being... a way for God to lead us to the realm of higher things”

- St. Augustine.

Liturgical scholar Fr. Anthony Ruff describes a four-fold nature of music (outside the realm of liturgy): “Music is a **powerful** means of interpersonal, **community**-forming **communication** that has an innately **ritual** character.”

Since music in-and-of-itself has **power, communicative capabilities**, and both a **communal** and **ritual character**, Ruff defines six major functions which music *BRINGS* to the liturgy. It serves to glorify God and sanctify the faithful, foster festivity in liturgical celebration, enhance the proclamation of the word, strengthen the bonds of community, promote participation, and foster cultural and artistic goods.

Theologian Edward Foley further explains that music must come forth from the liturgy, “music **OF** the liturgy” (Foley), and not be used in the liturgy just because it is a well written piece of music (“music **IN** the liturgy”). In fact, the US Bishops have defined a set of three judgments when choosing music for liturgy: **Liturgical** (does music fit liturgical action/season), **Pastoral** (does it reflect the parish/people), and **Musical** (is it well written, musically speaking). This gives parishes the flexibility to use music which reflects the life of the parish, but also ensures that the music used in the liturgy is not used for its own sake, but rather that it springs forth from the liturgy itself in response to God’s call of salvation. Through active participation then, we do this “public work” called liturgy.

Foley, Edward. [Age to Age: How Christians Have Celebrated the Eucharist](#). Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008.

Ruff, Anthony. [Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform: Treasures and Transformations](#). Chicago: Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy