Liturgy as a Work of Art

Liturgy, literally defined as “the work of the people,” is the great labor of the People of God gathered to give praise and thanks to the Father in the name of the Son, Jesus the Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy speaks of liturgy as both the summit toward which all the activity of the Church is directed and the source from which all the Church’s power flows (n. 10). It is also a foretaste of that ongoing heavenly liturgy toward which we are moving as pilgrims (n. 8). As a human endeavor, liturgy is composed of various parts working together harmoniously to enable all participants to be fully, actively, and consciously engaged. When this happens, the work of the people may also be considered a work of art.

Some may resist approaching liturgy as a work of art. It may sound too elitist, effete, or ethereal. We do not mean to evoke visions of theatrical extravaganzas, or to promote the surrender of the community’s prayer life to self-styled “artistes” who will determine the worship life of the community, or, finally, to encourage scenarios that tax the limits of either human or financial resources. When we use the phrase “liturgy as art,” we are thinking of those experiences that help us to hear, see, experience, and move towards our God who draws us into deeper communion. Liturgy is about movement: of the body, mind, heart, and spirit. Like all art, it is not afraid to disturb, irritate, or cause unease when such a response flows from the gospel call to walk the way of the Lord, to die to self that others might live, and to do what needs to be done so God is truly glorified. Most especially, liturgy is an arena where beauty can mediate God’s self-revelation and our response.

Encountering Beauty in Liturgy

The beauty of the liturgy depends on a balance of various components: preparing the environment, praying the prayers, proclaiming the Word, providing periods of silence, and performing the appropriate actions. The rituals of our faith cannot be reduced to aesthetics but neither can an

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aesthetic dimension be denied. Good liturgy helps us to live life more fully by enabling us to trust God as active and present, even in what is sometimes experienced as absence. The Document on Music in Catholic Worship reminds us: “Good celebrations foster and nourish faith; poor celebrations may weaken and destroy it” (n. 6). To facilitate the former, we will consider the various tasks involved in liturgical celebration.

Preparing the Environment: Lighting, banners, altar cloths, art work (stained glass, statuary), flowers, the sound system—all that goes into creating a sense of sacred space, is pertinent here. Natural elements—fresh plants, flowers, trees, and other natural forms—invite the simplicity of nature into liturgical celebrations. Most important is the beauty of the material realities at the heart of liturgy: the table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist, bread and wine, paten and chalice, the baptismal font, the containers for the holy oils.

If possible, engage artists within the parish and liturgical artists (nearby schools of theology may be useful in providing names). In older, historic churches, the architecture of the building may work against the current ecclesiology of the Church. In every way possible, try to use the interior space to reflect what the Church believes about the role of the assembly, the presider, and the other liturgical ministers. A good sound system is essential. Few experiences are more frustrating than being unable to hear. Sound engineers can be invaluable as consultants. Several well-placed speakers or a modest change in floor covering can make a big difference in the sound quality within a worship space, in addition to making available sound-enhancing devices for the hearing impaired.

Praying the Prayers: The prayers within the Sacramentary are said in the name of the community, addressed to the God who gathers the community. Vocalizing the words is not the same as praying the prayers. The difference has to do with how it comes across to those listening. Does it sound as if someone is being addressed—either God or, in the case of those moments of dialogue or invitation, the community? Are the words said with some degree of urgency, given due weight; do they sound heart-felt? It is unfortunate that the ICEL translation of the Sacramentary with its original prayers that draw on the Scriptures of the day languishes in Rome.

Proclaiming the Word: The proclaimer should read the text repeatedly in preparation and live with the scriptural reading during the week before the proclamation, allowing the meaning of the text to wash over the reality of his/her life. After praying with the Scripture, the proclaimer should have access to some good exegetical information that will help to illuminate the meaning of this text (e.g., Liturgical Training Publications’ Workbook for Lectors). It is crucial to practice aloud—if possible in front of a mirror—to find the best way to communicate a text’s meaning. Finally, know the text well. This does not mean memorize the text, but become so familiar with it that you are able to make eye contact often with the assembly during the proclamation.

The preaching that flows from the Scriptures offers beauty in its presentation of the gospel, that is, in the kind of language used to interpret scripturally the life of the community. The NCCB document Fulfilled In Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly, calls on preachers to turn to “the picture language of the poet and the storyteller,” using words and phrases that are “specific, graphic, and imaginative” (25). Such language binds the community in a common vision and enables it to recognize God’s presence and respond in mind and heart through worship and a life lived in light of the message.
Providing Periods of Silence: Participation comes in different forms. Silence can be one of them. Most members of the assembly probably have very little silence in their day-to-day lives. So, silence can be a gift. There are different kinds in liturgy. The silence after “Let us pray” invites us to focus our attention on what will be said in the community’s name. The silence after the readings and homily calls to reflection, so the Word can speak more personally to our lives. The silence after Communion can lead to a deeper intimacy with the saving mystery now dwelling within.

Silence may not always be the most effective way to provide a quiet, meditative space within the liturgy. For example, silence during the collection may focus the assembly’s attention on the sound of money clinking in the collection basket. There is nothing wrong with acknowledging the importance of the offering being made; however, if the goal is quiet reflection, perhaps a meditative instrumental or choir piece would be more effective. Listening is also a form of full, conscious, active participation. Instrumental music, solo, and choir pieces have a valued place within the continuing development of the tradition of Catholic music.

Preparing the Music: Ritual music is an essential element in establishing and maintaining the dynamic quality and emotional flow of the liturgy. The music, both instrumental and vocal, should be chosen and rendered by those who know ritual music. Many considerations go into such selection: the liturgical season or feast, the texts for the day, the artistic quality of the musical composition, the theology reflected in the words of a hymn. Those preparing ritual music obviously need to consider the liturgical movement that a specific piece will accompany. For example, both the gathering hymn and the communion music accompany processions (the assembly moving to receive communion is a procession.) Processions are meant to be watched. Thus, it makes sense that processional music would not require the assembly to be “glued” to the hymnal or worship aide: e.g., familiar hymns, mantras, or music where the choir sings the verses and the assembly sings the chorus.

Performing Liturgical Actions: The movement in liturgy matters. When we reflect on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist or in any liturgical celebration, emphasis falls on speaking the prescribed words and performing specific actions prescribed in the General Instruction on the Roman Missal. Less has been written about how these ritual actions are performed, the quality of the movement. Liturgy is not simply a static set of prescribed actions. Liturgy is organic: it lives, breathes, responds, and changes because, by the grace of Christ, human beings who live in a given time, place, and circumstance are called to participate fully in its celebration. The body is part of this full participation.

One of the old “saws” among liturgists is that you can survive any liturgical mishap if you just move slowly. While there is truth here, the arts of choreography and dance offer further development of aspects of movement that can serve liturgy. In dance, the varied movements of the human body itself are the instruments of the art. By moving with a “practiced grace,” liturgical ministers use their bodies to bring forth the beauty of the Roman Rite. Such “practiced grace” can only be achieved by rehearsing these movements so that all who are involved feel confident about their part in the liturgy.

Particularly in such complex liturgies as the Triduum it is essential that all who will be participating must also take part in the rehearsal. Imagine a ballet in which each of the dancers had only practiced individually or with one or two of the other dancers.
Excellence in liturgy requires collaboration. It is not enough for the lectors to know only their part or the presider only his/her part. Practiced grace is possible only when everyone involved has a sense of the flow of the entire liturgy. Like a powerful dance or theatrical production, the actions of each person connect in some way with the actions of all. In some parishes, “scripts” are prepared for a given liturgy so that everyone has the same information before them. It is essential to study the script for the rite, and learn (not memorize) it before the liturgy begins. It is clear when liturgical ministers know the rite.

In learning a rite, it is important to feel the emotional flow of the liturgy. In a recent production of “Sleeping Beauty” by the Kirov Ballet, when the prince went to awaken the princess with a kiss, he kissed her so quickly and so perfunctorily that, what should have been the emotional high point of the ballet, became instead a moment of snickering and laughter by the audience. A similar reaction might be evoked at the way we sometimes sign ourselves with the cross as we begin the gospel or hurriedly kiss the altar at the beginning of Mass. Then there are those bows that are barely a nod to God.

Ultimately, liturgy should result in movement at the deepest level of the human person, stirring the mind, heart, and spirit, and moving the body, awakened and alert to the presence of Christ, first towards the eucharistic table and then out into the world, ever more conscious of the Spirit moving within us as individuals and as the living Body of Christ.

Conclusion

Frederick Turner, a professor of arts and humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas, has said that the absence of beauty in every facet of our current culture, from the family to the institutions of our shared public life, is a direct cause of our social problems. Such a lack of access to beauty may be the truest definition of poverty. In a 1998 Easter letter to artists, Pope John Paul II quoted Dostoevsky’s saying, “beauty will save the world.” He went on to call on artists to provide “epiphanies of beauty.” Surely some of these epiphanies should be found within the worship life of the church.