Catechesis Through Liturgy

Using the Principles of the 2002 GIRM

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The revised General Instruction of the Roman Missal is a rich source for considering the foundational principles of liturgical catechesis. The author identifies six areas to help us examine our liturgical practices.

In his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, promulgated on April 17, 2003, Pope John Paul II reminded us that “the Church draws her life from the Eucharist” (no. 1). Indeed, the Eucharist is “the most precious possession which the Church can have in her journey through history” (no. 9) and is “at the center of the process of the Church’s growth” (no. 21). It is the “sacrament of ecclesial communion” (no. 43) since it “creates communion and fosters communion” (no. 40). These insights remind us of the power our liturgies can have to shape and form us. The 1978 National Catechetical Directory, *Sharing the Light of Faith*, explains: “Liturgy and catechesis support each other. Prayer and the sacraments call for informed participants; fruitful participation in catechesis calls for the spiritual enrichment that comes from liturgical participation. . . . Every liturgical celebration has educative and formative value” (no. 36).

Because the Eucharist is at the core of the Church’s identity, it matters how well we celebrate. Sunday Mass must never become a rote activity for those assembled and their ministers. It is incumbent on all—ordained and lay, male

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and female, young and old—to reflect regularly on this precious gift of the Lord to his Body, the Church, and, through this reflection, to consider whether their celebrations of the Eucharist are as nourishing as they might be. In the statement Music in Catholic Worship of the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, we read: “Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken and destroy it” (no. 6).

Some have considered the revised General Instruction of the Roman Missal contained in the third edition of the Roman Missal (hereafter, 2002 GIRM) as merely a revised rulebook with a few new options and a few new restrictions. It is, rather, a collection of guidelines that reiterates basic liturgical principles and contains exhortations regarding fundamental liturgical practices, in addition to giving more specific details. We do well to attend to such foundational principles and practices upon which our liturgical celebrations and our spiritual lives are built. The Mass itself “fosters and nourishes” the faith of those present. The extent to which we embody these principles in our parish celebrations matters.

Moreover, no celebration, whether of the Eucharist, of any other sacrament, or of any liturgical rite, is an end in itself. Any such celebration is only a privileged means of deepening our union with God and our love for our sisters and brothers in Christ as we continue on our earthly pilgrimage. Our liturgical celebrations are ways of helping us worship our God who touched our world in the person of Jesus, his Son. That Son reminded us that love of God should be reflected in love of neighbor and of self. The task of deepening this union, love, and worship is at the heart of liturgical catechesis.

Many have focused on the relatively few major rubrical changes found in the 2002 GIRM and overlook the bigger picture. No matter how rubrically correct a liturgy is, if it has not in some way helped those assembled experience a metanoia, deepened their union with and love of our Triune God, and led that assembly to help God’s kingdom of love and justice become more a reality in our world, something has been missing from that liturgy. The noted American Episcopal liturgical historian Thomas Talley wisely noted: “Too many communities have already been brought to despair by the discovery that, having rearranged the furniture of the sanctuary and instituted an offertory procession, they still don’t love one another” (49). As we reflect on the implementation of 2002 GIRM and on our community celebrations of the Eucharist, we have a rich source considering key principles for a catechesis through liturgy, remembering the ultimate reasons why we gather to celebrate the Eucharist at all.
**Three Presuppositions**

Before focusing on specific areas that the 2002 GIRM invites us to reflect upon, let me suggest three presuppositions that must inform all our preparation and catechesis: (1) Christ; (2) liturgical principles; and (3) worship.

1. **Christ** is the reason why we gather at all. In response to Christ’s command to “Do this in memory of me,” we gather, prompted by the Spirit, to remember the paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection. In our Eucharistic assembly, we thank our God for the gift of his Son and commit ourselves to each other to help God’s kingdom of peace, love, and justice become more of a reality. If Christ and his Body, the Church, are not at the center of our Eucharistic celebration, something significant is missing.

2. Our celebrations must display a respect for **liturgical principles**, and we should be cautious lest personal preferences, devotion, or even misunderstandings of the liturgical rite compromise such principles. The Swedish proverb, “Break your chains and you are free; cut your roots and you die,” is applicable to liturgy as well as to life. Liturgical principles give us “rootedness” in our tradition of worship and are not “chains” enslaving us.

3. We should realize, finally, that we are involved in an act of communal worship and not private prayer in common. Because of our involvement in worship, personal devotion should always take second place to a respect for solidarity with others present for worship. In his 1974 Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, Pope Paul VI cautioned against mixing “practices of piety and liturgical acts in hybrid celebrations” (no. 31). He noted that Vatican II prescribed “that exercises of piety should be harmonized with the liturgy, not merged into it,” referring to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (no. 13). The most appropriate time and place for private prayer may be in our homes—since, when we are in church, we should be engaged in communal worship instead.

**Six Areas for Focus**

The implementation of the 2002 GIRM in dioceses and parishes provides the opportunity to reflect on some of the basic liturgical principles that it emphasizes, and also to engage in a sort of “examination of conscience” as to how well the communities to which we belong are being guided by these fundamental principles in our celebrations and how well we are giving shape to them in our daily life. These principles can serve to develop a reflection on the central symbols and actions of the liturgy in catechesis so that we might celebrate liturgy more fully, consciously, and actively so as to enter more fully, consciously, and actively into daily communion with God in Christ through the Spirit.
We have an opportunity for catechesis and for private study of liturgical principles as well as for some changes in practices, if such are actually needed. Perhaps focusing on a few of the fundamental principles incarnated in the 2002 GIRM can stimulate reflection on other common practices we see in our parishes. Let me suggest these six areas for focus: The Unity of the Assembly; Silence as Integral to a Liturgical Celebration; The Dignity and Symbolic Nature of Liturgical Objects; Communion ex hac altaris participatione (from the altar of celebration); Singing as a Fundamental Component of Celebrations; and Distribution of Ministerial Roles. Let me also stress that these six areas are really advice contained in earlier versions of the GIRM that, in my opinion, have been given renewed emphasis in this latest revision.

**The Unity of the Assembly**

The revised version of the opening paragraph of chapter 3 (2002 GIRM, no. 91) speaks of the Eucharistic celebration as an action of Christ and “the holy people united and ordered under the Bishop.” Because of a past piety often described as an individualistic, “Jesus and me” spirituality and because of cultural forces that emphasize privacy and a “rugged individualism,” the call to unity, which has been a part of the GIRM since 1969, has often fallen on deaf ears. The 2002 GIRM cautions against “any appearance of individualism or division” (no. 95) and encourages all to form “one body” (no. 96) in the celebration of Mass.

At the beginning of the description of the liturgy, the 2002 GIRM notes that the purpose of singing during the entrance procession is to “foster the unity of those who have been gathered” (no. 47). The unity of all assembled is also mentioned in reference to the breaking of the bread (no. 83) and the form of the Eucharistic bread (no. 321). It is mentioned in reference to the posture of those assembled and to communal gestures (nos. 42, 96). It is even mentioned in reference to the design of a church (no. 294).

The reoccurring exhortation to unity should be a challenge for each community to reflect on how well they have responded to Christ’s last prayer, “Father, may they all be one” (John 17:21). When people sit scattered throughout a large church, when some are singing and others are not, when some stand after communion and sing while others kneel and pray silently, even individualistically, then, individual devotional practices seem to be taking a priority over communal worship of God. In such situations, the unity that is envisioned in the GIRM is imperfectly experienced.

**Questions for reflection**

How obviously is the unity described by the GIRM visibly manifested at a typical Mass in your parish? What would make the unity more visible? Do members of the assembly see their common posture, silence, gesture, and communal singing as symbols of the unity they share because of Christ?
Silence as Integral to a Liturgical Celebration

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy referred to reverential silence during the liturgy (no. 30), and the 1969 GIRM included some guidelines about appropriate moments for silence during the Mass (no. 23), in particular noting its appropriateness at the end of a reading and of the homily. The 2002 GIRM repeats these original guidelines (no. 45), but adds an additional paragraph (no. 56) on silence during the Liturgy of the Word that was taken from the Introduction to the Lectionary (no. 28).

These two paragraphs on silence should challenge us particularly to reflect on how well we provide appropriate moments of reflective silence during our liturgical celebrations. It is so easy to allow the “rat race” culture in which we live to influence how we celebrate the Eucharist. If anything, we need to provide opportunities for more, rather than less, silence during our celebrations.

Questions for reflection

During Masses in our churches, is there a moment of silence after the first reading, or does the reader or cantor rush into the psalm before the people are finished with their “Thanks be to God”? Does the presiding priest allow a moment of reflective silence after the homily so that people can savor the message preached, or does he rush immediately into the Creed or the General Intercessions? Is there a recognizable moment of silence after the “Let us pray” that introduces the collect and the prayer after Communion, or does the priest celebrant rush immediately into the “O God” that begins the text of the prayer? Are prayers pronounced, by all in the assembly, with a pace appropriate to their dignity, or is the pace closer to that of an experienced auctioneer during an auction?

Dignity and Symbolic Nature of Liturgical Objects

The 2002 GIRM points out the ancient tradition of the altar representing Christ, the Living Stone (no. 298; also see Built of Living Stones, no. 56). Ultimately, because the altar is the architectural symbol of Christ in a church, it is kissed by the priest and deacon at the beginning and end of a Eucharistic liturgy (as well as at other solemn rites, such as Evening Prayer; see the Ceremonial of Bishops, 196).

As a result of the altar’s basic symbolism, only those things necessary for the liturgy should be placed on the altar and, then, only when needed. The 2002 GIRM specifically notes that only the Book of the Gospels should be on the altar before the proclamation of the Gospel, and only the bread and wine and items absolutely necessary (e.g., corporal, purificator, Missal) during the Liturgy of the Eucharist (no. 306). This follows the reverential custom in some Eastern Churches in which even the priest’s book of prayers is not supposed to be placed on the altar. The 2002 GIRM now specifically notes that flowers are better placed around
the altar rather than upon it (no. 305) and reiterates permission to place candles around the altar rather than upon it (nos. 117, 307).

The 2002 GIRM also directs attention toward the altar on which Mass is normally celebrated, rather than toward old altars no longer in use, by prescribing that old altars should not be decorated (no. 303) and that a cloth should be used on the altar “where this memorial [of the Lord] is celebrated” (no. 304). In addition, the 2002 GIRM includes a new paragraph (no. 349), taken from the Introduction to the Lectionary (no. 35), that points out that the liturgical books, particularly the Book of the Gospels and the Lectionary, are signs and symbols of transcendent realities and must be dignified and beautiful.

Furthermore, the 2002 GIRM, in two places (nos. 58, 260), notes that the readings are to be proclaimed from the ambo (a simple lectern is permitted at a Mass with only one minister present). This reemphasizes the admonitions originally found in the 1969 GIRM about the use of the ambo only by those who proclaim God’s word (i.e., deacons, readers, psalmists) and about the dignity of God’s word (no. 272). The main description of the ambo in the GIRM now includes a sentence about the “dignity of the ambo” and notes that this dignity “requires that only a minister of the word should go up to it” (no. 309). Thus, it should not be used by others, such as commentators (no. 105b).

One should also note that references to “sign” and “symbol” were also present in previous editions of the GIRM, though often overlooked. In reference to Communion under both kinds, the 2002 GIRM notes that “even by means of the signs Communion will stand out more clearly” if it is thus offered (no. 85). And in reference to the Eucharistic bread, the GIRM notes that, even though unleavened, “the meaning of the sign demands that the material for the Eucharistic celebration truly have the appearance of food” (no. 321).

Reverence of symbols and of the realities they represent is basic to religious tradition, but religious symbols can be so easily overlooked in a culture dominated by practicality and efficiency. Thus, it may take a concentrated effort to sensitize ourselves, and others, to the symbolic nature of our worship and the basic symbols we use during the celebration of the Eucharist. The new and revised paragraphs offer us the opportunity to reflect on the basic signs and symbols used during the liturgy and on whether our use of them is in accord with the important spiritual realities they symbolize.

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Questions for reflection

Is there anything on the altar that is really inconsistent with the Eucharistic celebration, such as a “Unity Candle” during a wedding, or that is unneeded at that point of the celebration, such as the chalice or Missal at the beginning of Mass? Do lectors regularly proclaim the scripture from missalettes or xeroxed pages rather than a well-bound lectionary? Do seasonal decorations (such as a manger before the altar) obscure rather than enhance the primary symbols of the church?

Communion ex hac altáris participatióne

The 2002 GIRM (no. 85) has modified the encouragement found in the 1969 GIRM (no. 56h) about the faithful receiving Communion from elements consecrated at that Mass, rather than from the tabernacle, and, in a sense, has made this encouragement even stronger. The revised paragraph adds that “the priest himself is bound” to receive Communion from what is consecrated at that same Mass. In this context the 2002 GIRM repeats the admonition that “it is most desirable” that the faithful also receive Communion from what is consecrated at that Mass. One should note that even though the 2002 GIRM (as did all the earlier versions) specifies that a church have a tabernacle, and now notes that the leftover hosts not used at Communion may be brought to the “place designated for the reservation of the Eucharist” (no. 163), nowhere does it hint that it is ever permitted to go to the tabernacle to distribute the sacramental elements reserved there during Mass. The section of the Roman Ritual, “Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass,” states in its Introduction that the primary purpose of reserving the Eucharist is the administration of viaticum and that the secondary reasons are the giving of communion (outside Mass) and adoration of Christ (no. 5). But reserving the Eucharist to distribute Communion during Mass is never mentioned as a possibility.

Even though the admonition that all receive Communion from what has been consecrated at that Mass has been repeated over and over again, in a document from an ecumenical council, namely Vatican II, and in documents from several popes throughout history (see Smolarski, 75), it is still common practice in many parishes to bring several ciboria of consecrated hosts from the tabernacle to be used by those ministering Communion at Mass. The ideal of Eucharistic practice that is preserved on Holy Thursday, which prescribes only one Mass and an empty tabernacle at the beginning of that Mass, should be an ideal that we try to attain at every liturgy. Sunday liturgies may present more problems in planning for the number of communicants, but certainly most parishes should have a sense of how many, within a range of about ten people, will receive communion at weekday Masses. The ideal of all present sharing from the “one loaf” to become one body in Christ (see 1 Cor 10:17; 2002 GIRM, nos. 83, 321) should be something we should strive for at every Mass. In some places, achieving this
ideal may necessitate a change of practice, eliminating the use of a separate “priest’s host” and using, instead, a larger host or several larger hosts that, when broken, can be shared among many communicants.

Related to distributing Communion only from what is consecrated at that Mass is the explicit norm that, if the tabernacle is in the sanctuary rather than in a separate chapel, one does not genuflect toward it during Mass (2002 GIRM, no. 274). Although the Eucharistic elements in the tabernacle are rightly reverenced outside Mass, during Mass the focus should be on the ambo and altar (toward which all should bow, 2002 GIRM, no. 275b). Thus, older practices, such as ushers genuflecting at the head of the aisle before beginning to take up the collections, might need to be reexamined.

Communities should also heed the advice about offering Communion from the chalice whenever permitted (cf. 2002 GIRM, no. 85). The GIRM quite strongly states, “It is most desirable that the faithful . . . in the instances when it is permitted . . . partake of the chalice” (emphasis added). Elsewhere the GIRM reminds us of the symbolic value of this way of receiving Communion: “Holy Communion has a fuller form as a sign when it is distributed under both kinds . . . clear expression is given to the divine will by which the new and eternal Covenant is ratified in the Blood of the Lord. . . .” (no. 281).

It is noteworthy that the 2002 GIRM has removed the need for the bishop’s explicit permission to give Communion from the chalice to certain participants at Mass (no. 283), thus presenting Communion under both kinds as an expected way in which communion is given during every Mass, at least to certain members of the assembly. The fact that the 2002 GIRM now permits priests to hold the host over the chalice while inviting the assembly to Communion at the “This is the Lamb of God . . .” (nos. 84, 157, 268) indicates, through symbol, that the assembly is being invited to receive Communion under both kinds. Once again, we are challenged to strive toward the ideal depicted in the GIRM: communion under both species.

**Questions for reflection**

Is Communion from the chalice regularly offered to all in the assembly at every Mass? Is it standard practice to distribute hosts from the tabernacle at every Mass, when there is no need to do so? Does the priest celebrant use a two inch
host which he alone consumes, or is a larger “loaf” used—or multiple large hosts—the pieces of which are distributed to members of the assembly? Do the ministers of Communion ever consume the excess consecrated bread (if the particles are few in number) after Communion, as they consume the excess consecrated wine?

**Singing as a Fundamental Component of Celebrations**

The 2002 GIRM enhances its encouragement of singing (nos. 39–41) by an addition not found in the 1969 GIRM (no. 19). The 2002 GIRM states that, “every care should be taken that singing by the ministers and the people is not absent in celebrations that occur on Sundays and on holy days of obligation” (no. 40). In several places the text of the 2002 GIRM has been emended so that the words “sung or” are added to the words “is said,” for example, for the *Kyrie* (no. 125), the *Gloria* (no. 126), the Creed (no. 137), and the Preface (no. 216). In at least one case, “sings or recites” was changed to “sings,” referring to the *Sanctus* (no. 79b).

There are still many parish churches where there is no singing at some Sunday Masses, often the early ones, or where singing occurs at secondary times, such as during the preparation of the gifts, rather than at liturgically key places, such as before the Gospel and during the Eucharistic prayer. All editions of the GIRM have proclaimed the words of Augustine: “Singing is for lovers” (2002 GIRM, no. 39), and if we are to be known as “Christians by our love,” we should also be known as Christians by our enthusiasm in singing as well.

**Questions for reflection**

Is there singing at every Mass on Saturday evening and Sunday? Are the key acclamations (e.g., *Alleluia*, *Sanctus*, memorial acclamation, Great Amen) always sung? Are the hymns chosen of appropriate quality (musically, theologically, liturgically) to engage all present and to fulfill their purpose in the liturgy properly?

**Distribution of Ministerial Roles**

A liturgical principle that tends to be overlooked is the proper delegation and distribution of liturgical roles. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy addressed the issue of the ideal of a community of believers gathered together but, nevertheless, reminded us that all should do their proper roles and not anything more (no. 28). This principle has been explicitly mentioned in the 2002 GIRM twice (nos. 5, 91).

One consequence of this principle is that the priest celebrant should not proclaim a scripture reading when other appropriate ministers are present. Thus, in referring to the office of proclaiming scripture, the GIRM reminds us that this function “is ministerial, not presidential. The readings, therefore, should be proclaimed by a lector, and the Gospel by a deacon or, in his absence, a priest other
than the celebrant” (no. 59). The GIRM also advises that “if there are several readings, it is well to distribute them among a number of lectors” (no. 109).

Since each minister should ideally do only what is part of his or her specific ministry, it is preferable, for example, when capable ministers are available, not to have one person serve both as lector and Communion minister at the same Mass.

Regarding the distribution of roles, sometimes one detects a tendency to delegate too much, as is seen when the principal celebrant delegates the introduction and conclusion of the General Intercessions to a concelebrant. Certain parts of the Mass by their nature belong to the principal celebrant and, thus, should never be delegated to another (see 2002 GIRM, no. 108). On the other hand, there is also the danger of perpetuating the pre-Vatican II model of the presiding priest being the liturgical factotum and reserving several ministerial offices to himself, contrary to liturgical principles (as well as to rubrical norms).

The ideal envisioned by the GIRM is a community of faith with an adequate number of ministers, each of whom performs his or her assigned task during the Eucharistic celebration, all in service of the community’s worship of God.

Questions for reflection

Do various ministers (ushers, lectors, cantors) exercise their ministry well? Is there continuing formation for all liturgical ministers not only for their skills but to deepen their spirituality of ministry? Is the local practice such that one individual fulfills several ministries at the same Mass?

On-Going Formation

Education about liturgy, as well as the rest of life, and formation through liturgy are an on-going process. The pastoral Introduction to the Order of Mass, issued in late 2003 by the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, is one semi-official compendium and companion guide to the 2002 GIRM. The document was prepared by ICEL (the International Commission on English in the Liturgy) and was provided to Conferences of Bishops as an introduction to the official texts of the Roman Missal for adaptation or enhancement by the Conferences. It was created in the style of the pastoral introductions found in the Order of Christian Funerals and Pastoral Care of the Sick, with material based on official documents.

The U.S. version includes the modifications approved by the U.S. Bishops and included in the U.S. version of the 2002 GIRM. Its format is similar to that of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, in which major paragraphs are often followed by bulleted sub-paragraphs offering suggestions, specifications, and additional information related to the main topic. As a whole, the document provides a handy
summary of liturgical norms and pastoral suggestions for the celebration of Mass and is one resource, among many, that is available for ongoing formation of clergy and other liturgical leaders, and could form a basis, for example, for parish study or reading groups.

Toward the Ultimate Goal

Liturgy, like the Church, is a reality that is semper reformanda (always being reformed). The publication of the 2002 GIRM offers all involved in worship an opportunity to reflect, once again, on how well we actually celebrate the mystery of the Eucharist, the center of Christian life. For such an opportunity to reflect on how we gather together to praise our God, we should truly give thanks.

There will be other revisions of the GIRM in the future, if the past is any indicator. The challenge of the people of God is to accept these revisions as road signs helping us on our never-ending journey toward the new and eternal Jerusalem as depicted at the end of the book of Revelation (Rev 21). We need to remember that Revelation depicts heaven as a wedding banquet (Rev 19:9) and the Eucharist is our earthly foretaste of that eternal banquet. Celebrating the Eucharist is the most important activity the Church on earth can do to remind us of who we are as followers of Christ. It is our duty to celebrate as best we can—and the revised GIRM is there to help those Catholics who are part of the liturgical tradition known as the Roman Rite do just that. It is also our duty not to get sidetracked and let the road signs distract us from remembering what our ultimate destination actually is and from remembering also that our nourishment for the journey should enable us to love God and our neighbor better.

When Jesus appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, they said to him, “we used to hope that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). These disciples had put their hopes in Christ, but in a way that could not be fulfilled. Yet their hopes were, indeed, to be fulfilled in a way they did not expect, in the burning inside their hearts and in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:32, 35). Many have repeated the same words, “we used to hope,” about liturgical renewal,
putting their hopes in various practices or texts (see Hughes, Introduction). Ultimately, we may find our hopes fulfilled in ways we did not expect, when we focus on the burning inside our hearts and the simplicity of the breaking of the bread. May the Spirit of the Risen Lord guide us on our journey toward that new and eternal Jerusalem!

References

