The dynamics of ritual and rites of passage help to shed light on different experiences that Hispanic and Latino/a parishioners bring to and expect from the Sunday Eucharist and to enrich pastoral ministers’ response to the needs of immigrants seeking God in the new circumstances of their lives.

The rumor spread like wildfire through the south-side parishes of Milwaukee on the Second Sunday of Easter. Someone knew someone who had been detained by la migra in recent raids, and word had it that the immigration officials were going to arrest people attending Mass that weekend. The panic reached such heights that the usual standing-room-only crowds at the Spanish-language Masses of the local parishes were nowhere to be found. The attendance was as sparse as that of the English-language Masses. Even the associate pastor of one of the parishes, himself an immigrant from England and fluent in Spanish, advised those present to go home. They rushed home in tears fearful they would be detained as they scurried home, including one of my acquaintances: after all, if el padrecito was saying this at Mass it had to be true!

Almost immediately the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, through its vicar for Hispanic Ministry, sent out an urgent e-mail to the priests and other ministers of the

archdiocese that this was a false rumor and had no basis in fact. The following week, the immigrant associate pastor wrote a long note of apology in the bulletin and spoke at the Masses of that weekend about his own embarrassment at his role in spreading the rumor. He also took note of how powerful the word is and how easily one can be misled. It was a lesson in the power of the priest but also of ritual in the midst of fear as a source to encounter God’s consolation, hope, serenity, and guidance for right relationships in life.

This event raises three points to consider. First, the attendance of great numbers of immigrants at Sunday Eucharist begs the question of what they might be seeking there both from the liturgy and from the church. Second, what might the role of ritual and those charged with leading its performance be in the lives of these worshipers? And third, what do events like this call theologians and pastoral ministers to consider when it comes to liturgy among immigrants, in this case Hispanics or Latinos and Latinas?

In order to reflect on these points, I focus on liturgy among Hispanics from the perspective of ritual and what Latino/a immigrants are seeking from liturgy. In my judgment, they are seeking a sense that God is with them to console them as they navigate the dangers of being in a country all too ready to reject them. I do so as a Hispanic priest with a graduate degree in liturgical studies and as one who both ministers in Hispanic parishes and teaches in a Roman Catholic seminary.

**Meaningful Action**

There is an expression in English that says, “Actions speak louder than words.” It points to the role actions have in constituting who we are as persons. That is because actions are symbolic: they evoke feelings and reveal values (Nine-Curt, 84). Because actions embody what is meaningful, they constitute culture. As a result, scholars of ritual studies examine actions, particularly rituals or actions that follow identifiable patterns in order to discover how culture is constituted by rituals and to discern the meaning they generate. The term **ritual**, therefore, denotes a specific cultural activity composed of particular phases and patterned actions in which persons perform their culture.

Among the many approaches to ritual, the anthropological approach has shifted tremendously in the last fifteen years. From an approach that viewed rituals as static, structural, and conservative, many who study rituals now view them for the most part as flowing, processual, and subversive. Ritual is flowing because it is an action performed according to a pattern even if it has its own logic at times. Ritual is processual because it follows a process; it takes effort, time, and specific steps to be accomplished. Ritual is subversive because as symbolic action it carries intended and unintended meanings (see Driver, 79; Grimes, 6, 8, 17). Much credit for this shift goes to Victor Turner, who, building on the work of Arnold van
Gennep (1909, 1960), among others, introduced the concepts of liminality, ritual process, social drama, and *communitas*. These concepts underlie my understanding of the role of liturgy, especially in terms of the event described above.

The concept of liminality comes from van Gennep, who introduced it in connection with rites of passage. Rites of passage are rituals used to help people move from one social status or state to another. Societies provide these rituals in order to integrate their members into the culture constructed by them. Rites of passage are usually associated with life changes such as birth, adolescence, and new responsibilities. They may be highly or loosely structured, individual or communal. Examples in U.S. culture include acquisition of a driver's license, graduation ceremonies, marriage rites, initiations, and presidential inaugurals, among others.

One of the stages of rites of passage is “liminality,” what Turner calls being betwixt and between (Turner, 95). In liminality one is inserted into a state that goes somewhat beyond the here and now. Furthermore, one no longer is what one was but not yet what one is becoming. An analogous way of expressing in theological terms the experience of liminality is that of undergoing conversion. The late liturgical theologian Mark Searle notes that in every ritual the three stages of separation, transition, and aggregation can be found (Searle, 46). In terms of liminality as conversion and liturgy, Searle observes that “every liturgical celebration . . . is an attempt to facilitate the experience of conversion by ritualizing it. . . . The individual is helped by the Church to read the signs of his crisis as a call to faith and conversion” (Searle, 49). Rituals help the person get through this stage that can be dangerous or difficult to negotiate since in any change the outcome is not guaranteed nor always foreseen. They can be dangerous in that, as participants are pushed beyond their current abilities and knowledge to acquire new or greater abilities and knowledge, they may experience psychic, physical, or spiritual pain. This is often brought on by the effort itself or by the rites developed by society. Also, participants are not guaranteed success, for they may fail, drop out, resist, acquire unforeseen abilities and knowledge, or in extreme cases even die (Kimball, ix). As a result the subversive aspect of rituals comes to the fore since the liminality

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of being betwixt and between has a dynamism to it that does not guarantee a foreseen outcome. Part of the reason is because rituals involve “process,” that is, actions that take time and go through various steps or stages. Therefore, rituals are processual by nature.

One of the tools of ritual is “social drama,” the paradigmatic presentation of the deepest cultural values of a society. That is, rituals perform what it means to be part of a certain group, society, or culture by moving beyond a purely cognitive presentation of that meaning to one that engages the total person, body and mind, intellect and affect. Perhaps the most important aspect of this engagement is at the affective level. As Bernard Lonergan notes, the affect is the power of conscious living in that feelings orient one’s being and involve intentional responses (Lonergan, 32). These intentional responses constitute one’s world of meaning or culture.

Those undergoing the same process of performing their culture are bonded in a way that Turner names *communitas* (Turner, 96–97, 126–29). This he identifies as a modality of social relationship that acquires a type of sacredness for “it is a matter of giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be no society” (Turner, 96–97). Thus, rituals are necessary actions that help the members of a society integrate themselves into their society and to constitute their culture. Or, as liturgical theologian Crispino Valenziano summarizes this notion, a rite (i.e., ritual) is an institution based on a theme, or culturally directed values, and a model, or the repetition of these values in a cultural exemplar (Valenziano, 209–10).

**Religious Rituals**

Rituals in the religious realm are those actions related to an ultimate frame of reference. Ronald Grimes claims that performing these actions is understood to be of cosmic necessity (Grimes, 158). In Catholic circles, the most important religious rituals are liturgical in nature. They involve worship of God, express faith in God by specific though symbolic ways, and communicate God’s saving grace. The church sees liturgy as central, identifying liturgy as the “fount and summit” of its life (SC, no. 10). In general, the church teaches that liturgy is a participation in the mystery of Christ as well as a human activity “whereby the faithful may express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church” (SC, no. 2). Thus at liturgy the participants not only pray what they believe, but they perform that belief in symbolic and meaningful ways so that they may encounter God active in their lives and enter into the economy of salvation, making them God’s people.

Ritual, according to Catherine Bell, is often treated theoretically as if it were thoughtless action distinguishable from the conceptual aspects of religion (Bell, 19).
Most theories of ritual tend to see beliefs, creeds, symbols, and myths as the conceptual blueprints that direct, inspire, or promote ritual activity. Bell, instead, takes ritual to be a form of praxis, that is, a unity of consciousness and social being that has the power to transform real existence by itself, without the need for conceptual tools (Bell, 75). Thus, Bell identifies other aspects of religious ritual important to consider: its ability to create and order social relations, to distinguish local identities, and to control the contention and negotiation involved in the appropriation of symbols (Bell, 130, 140). This goes above and beyond texts, creeds, etc. For although there is a dynamic interaction of these with ritual action, ritual as praxis is “the strategic production of expedient schemes that structure an environment in such a way that the environment appears to be the source of the schemes and their values” (Bell, 140).

**Liturgy and Subversive Ritual**

In light of the theoretical framework described above, the reason there are large numbers of Hispanic immigrants at Mass on Sunday has something to do with finding themselves betwixt and between. It also has something to do with the need to negotiate integration into the larger society they encounter in the United States and the apparent dangers this involves. But why the Mass? Because, in my opinion, the Mass is a familiar element from their countries of origin and a constitutive element of their identity. Through the liturgy they reaffirm their history, their meaning system, and their faith in a God who accompanies them through life. In addition, they make themselves known by manifesting their identity as God’s people and demand they be recognized as such.

Since the liturgy in a U.S. context is distinct from that of their homelands, however, their experience of it in this context creates its own dissonance. As a result, through the differences experienced, they are acquiring a different vision of what it means to be Catholic, what it means to worship God, how to understand that God, and what the role of the church is in their faith life and their daily lives. At the same time as they are engaging in the Mass to reaffirm their history, meaning system, and faith in God, they are being led into a reassessment of these things, including the Mass itself.

Allow me to explain by relating the following experience. Juan typically goes to church only occasionally. At least that is how it used to be back home. Funerals, weddings, and Masses associated with his involvement in the Hermandad de Nuestro Padre Jesús el Nazareno (the Brotherhood of Our Father Jesus the Nazarene) charged with preparing the Holy Week processions of his parish were the events that drew him to church. More typically his wife Marta went to church at least weekly, sometimes more often. There, amidst the throngs of parishioners, she would light her candles to the Virgin, pray her rosary, and try to listen to the
sermons of Padre Chuy so that she could go home and impart his teachings to her children. As is the custom of her culture, she was the one charged with praying for her family and handing on the religious traditions she was taught. She often found the parish church an oasis from the hustle and bustle of her daily life. On the other hand, Padre Chuy—stretched thin by the usual six Masses a weekend plus the two weddings, a funeral, and baptisms interspersed—was known as a regañón (a scolder or one who was always cross). His Masses were typically said rote and the ceremonial of liturgy was often missing. Nonetheless, he was considered a sacred person, one who imparted God's blessings and communicated certainty and stability in the midst of a hard life. He could be counted on to hear confessions “as catch can” before Mass and to bless whatever religious object, medal, or image was presented to him at the end of Mass. One showed up for baptisms when the padrinos (godparents) were available, and wedding preparation consisted of filling out the paperwork and a three-week notice to make arrangements. Catechesis consisted of long sermons in church and the periodic processions for this saint's day or that high holy day's attendant activities—all typically huge public displays of faith for all to see and to encounter the church alive in their everyday lives.

Now in the United States, due to the various circumstances that brought them here, Juan and Marta attend Mass at one of the south-side parishes of the city threatened with closure due to the lack of parishioners. The parish has no hermandad to organize Holy Week activities and there is only one Mass a weekend in Spanish that is usually overcrowded. Padre Memo, as he likes to be called, or Father Bill to the English-speaking parishioners, speaks only of love and God's mercy in his short Spanish-language homilies. He seems to like ceremony and tries to get as many of the parishioners involved in liturgical ministries as possible. He gets frustrated by their lack of liturgical knowledge and counts on Maria, the Spanish-language coordinator of religious education, to help organize these ministries. Yet, when he is approached before Mass to hear confession, he sternly informs them that confessions are the first and third Saturday of the month from 3:00–4:00 PM. Or when asked to arrange for a baptism or wedding, he first asks if they are registered in the parish, and second, to make an appointment with the secretary during the week between 8:30 and 4:00, Monday through Friday. Though he may concede to bless their religious objects, he often

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finds it quite quaint, especially since so few of these immigrants go to Communion and refuse to take the cup when they do. Therefore, he puts long inserts into the parish bulletin explaining this or that fine point of the liturgy in an attempt to educate the new parishioners on their faith. He emphasizes the intellectual aspect of faith and never addresses its affective aspect. He is amazed at their great interest in Ash Wednesday and dismayed at their lack of attendance at Easter services. Juan and Marta, on the other hand, are pleased that he tries to get people involved in parish activities like potlucks and the parish festival but wonder why all the activity is limited to the church building or the parish hall.

**Shifting Meanings**

In Latin America where there are very few priests, and the vast majority of the population is at least nominally Catholic, the population feels little compunction to attend Mass on a weekly basis. After all, the cultural atmosphere is imbued with “Catholicism”: the periodic public displays of faith as seen in Holy Week processions, Christmas customs, and other events in between as well as the notion of celebrating one’s “saint’s day” rather than one’s birthday—all serve to reinforce a sense that life is full of God’s presence in a Catholic vein. This is not to say that the Eucharist is unimportant. Rather it functions as the center from which the devotional practices and religio-cultural events emanate. Liturgy is the realm of what is most sacred and the responsibility of the clergy and, as such, functions well. As long as the priest is doing his part, people are assured of God’s blessings and consoling presence. A certain hierarchical order is reinforced as a result in which all have their place and duties. In this sense, the church building becomes the center of the relationships formed by the liturgical and popular devotional rituals, but these relationships are not confined to the building, but rather pour out into the streets and into homes to bring them Christ’s life. Human relationships celebrated both at home and in public spaces are drawn into the church for sanctification and renewal. *Communitas* is fostered and strengthened, because all know their parts and they can rely on the rituals to help them negotiate the difficulties of life as well as find God in their lives.

Thus ritual goes beyond rites or specific ritual units. Ritual is the cohort of patterned actions that are symbolic in nature and meaningful for those who participate in them. When performed by a group or a society, be it a church or a country, ritual is performed to create, sustain, manifest and transmit the group’s identity, deepest values, and world of meaning. Another way of saying this is that ritual is the performance of the paradigmatic story of one’s culture or metanarrative.

Through liturgy *qua* ritual Juan can imbibe his Catholicism from the activities of the hermandad and other public displays of faith. Marta can be renewed in her role as the one who imparts faith and teaches the correct way to pray to her
children. Padre Chuy can be cross, for he is about the serious business of speaking for God and imparting God’s grace and teaching to those who seek it out. This situation is marked by an abundance of factors that reinforce the cultural aspect of their Catholic identity but also provide the fertile ground for faith to grow. Nonetheless, it can also reinforce a lack of depth or clear understanding of what is the content of that faith and the meanings it carries or the power relationships it shores up.

When people who have this experience of the church immigrate to the United States, they soon discover that there are very few public displays of faith, even among those who appear to be very religious Catholics. As a result, if they desire to maintain a sense of who they are as Catholics, they have to seek out those events and institutions that will give them a sense of self. They are in a liminal state and so they turn to the church for help. Often they find that requires attending Mass on a regular basis. The fact that the priest is frequently a non-native Spanish-speaker is not as important as having Mass in Spanish. The reassuring language that is the source of their God-talk is fed by the familiar catechetical and theological words of the liturgy. Soon they learn that if they want to fortify this sense of God’s continuing presence in their lives, they have great numbers of others in the same situation attending Mass alongside them. This leads to making connections with other immigrants from their home area and the development of activities among themselves sometimes in an attempt to recreate the devotional and public displays of faith they were familiar with at home. Soon they find they have access to the liturgy in ways they had not had before: They are invited to be readers and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, to be deacons and prayer leaders, so that the liturgy acquires new meaning.

But they also encounter disconcerting elements such as so much attention to detail and planning that often the spirit and affective aspect of liturgy is obscured. Whereas in the first situation Padre Chuy is overworked and stretched beyond the ability to pay attention to the finer aspects of liturgy, it is nonetheless done with as much dignity and pomp as possible and to the extent possible the people’s devotional life is acknowledged and incorporated into liturgical events. In the second situation, Padre Memo’s own idiosyncrasies become the criteria for what is done and not done at liturgy and who is or is not selected to participate. Whereas in the first situation the vertical dimension is overemphasized, in the second the

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horizontal is overemphasized, and thus people like Juan and Marta can come away confused: the Mass feels more like a meeting than an encounter with the sacred.

With time and experience, Juan and Marta soon discover others in the same situation. They form a new communitas of those who want to maintain their faith in the midst of turmoil and who are trying to negotiate their way in the new host culture. They seek some signs of familiarity in the liturgy that will reassure them that God is with them to console them through the difficulties of life, but they also find their image of God and what God is doing in their lives being subverted, oftentimes by the liturgy itself. Men's and women's roles regarding prayer and the fostering of faith become the explicit responsibility of both; both are invited to take on liturgical roles and to participate actively in the liturgy. Rather than stress his position at the top of the parish hierarchy, Padre Memo tries to be a peer, asking the parishioners to call him Bill or to use the familiar form tú instead of the formal usted. The fact that the liturgy is celebrated in Spanish is itself subversive in the context of a dominant culture that currently wishes to make English the official language of the United States. The fact that the new immigrants are filling the south-side churches in Milwaukee, for instance, and calling for the celebration of their ethnic festivals creates an imbalance between the older, smaller ethnic groups who established the parishes and still more often than not control the parish finances. As a result, power relationships are being negotiated between the new immigrants themselves, between the priest and the parishioners, and between parishioners of varying ethnic groups.

**Cultural Liturgy**

In an attempt to respond to the pastoral needs of immigrants from Latin America, many pastors and dioceses have established the celebration of Mass in Spanish. However, this is not enough. Pastors and other ministers also must see that they are agents of a certain cultural Catholicism that has stressed the intellectual over the affective, the participatory over the hierarchical, and the individual over the communal experience of God. As a result, there is often conflict between ministers and parishioners because the bridges between these two aspects have not been sufficiently built. The rituals of integration into U.S. Catholicism are what take place at the liturgical celebrations themselves. Though this Catholicism is by no means static, knowing what are the unspoken expectations and hopes/dreams of the new parishioners can go a long way in helping them enter into the process of the construction of Catholicism in the United States. This may mean adapting and inculturating the liturgy so that the new parishioners from Latin America (or elsewhere) may find enough vestiges of the God they knew so that they can discover who God is now in their search for his consolation in the present circumstances of their lives.
The celebration of liturgy *qua* ritual conveys this consolation in a dynamic fashion both through word and praxis. For the participants, whether in Latin America or the United States, whether south-side immigrant parishioners fearing *la migra* or Juan and Marta participating more fully in the liturgy, whether Padre Chuy or Father Bill celebrating the liturgy as best they can, enter into the liminality that takes them from the daily events of their lives to a sense of being betwixt and between heaven and earth. They are drawn into the process of enacting the social drama of Catholicism so that the participants can imbibe the deepest values it holds. In this way the participants subvert the ordinary ways of being as they become something extraordinary. That is, through the meaningful and symbolic action called liturgical ritual they form a *communitas* of individuals who are offered God’s consolation and the grace to become the people of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

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