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American Catholic Worship: An Anthropological View from the Sidelines

From November 1993 to July 1995—when I was not teaching courses at Michigan State University—I immersed myself in my anthropological research project on liturgical renewal, which I called “American Catholic Ritual Life in the Post-Vatican II Era.” I had begun that research intending to focus on the rituals themselves. I was inspired by a comment made to me by Nathan Mitchell, associate director of the Notre Dame Center for Pastoral Liturgy, at the end of our first conversation:

“We have thick descriptions of a cockfight in Bali but not of a Mass in the United States.” What he meant was that anthropologists routinely have provided detailed studies of a vast variety of complex ritual and ritual-like events from societies throughout the world (e.g., Geertz’s [1973] study of the cockfight in Bali). Yet, despite the now long-standing interest by American liturgists in anthropological concepts, there are still no in-depth ethnographic descriptions, analyses, or interpretations of what liturgists would consider the summit of the worship life for tens of millions of American Catholics (Roberts 1995, 61).

As my research progressed I found myself focusing, instead, on the ritual experts as much as the rituals and was soon deeply involved in the worlds of Catholic liturgists. The story of how and why that change of research directions took place can be found elsewhere (Roberts 1995; 1996). Here I just need to mention that I spent many days at liturgical workshops and meetings on the parish, diocesan, and national levels. In addition to these participant observation activities, I read voraciously from works written by liturgists for a variety of audiences (scholarly, pastoral, popular) in order to understand the

context of the events I was viewing. This time period was particularly controversial for Catholic liturgy in the United States. Mother Angelica had compared liturgists unfavorably with terrorists, and a variety of groups were actively attacking the proposed International Commission on English in the Liturgy translations of the sacramentary. Debates on these issues were headline items not only for liturgical publications, but for the more general Catholic press. To keep track of the fast-moving events, I read newspapers and magazines representing a broad spectrum of views—*National Catholic Reporter*, *National Catholic Register*, *Commonweal*, *New Oxford Review*, *Catholic World Report*, *Fidelity*.

Beginning mid-July 1995, however, I had little time for the liturgical workshops and meetings that had become so much a part of my life, and copies of my “church-related” magazines and newspapers grew into large, unread piles. At that time I began a year-long term as acting chair of the department of anthropology at Michigan State University. I was plunged into the university’s administrative whirlpool, having to respond on behalf of my department to the barrage of memos and directives from the university’s upper administration. I also found myself immersed in the wider world of anthropology. As head of the department, I felt compelled to look beyond my own narrow research interests and spend time attending all the talks and colloquia we sponsored, acquainting myself with the current work of twenty-plus colleagues and nearly ninety graduate students, scanning the *Anthropology Newsletter* for trends in the profession that might affect our program, and listening to speeches on the present state and possible future of anthropology at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association.

In this article I hope to provide some of my reflections on the worship life of American Catholics that have resulted from my having spent so much of this past year on the sidelines of liturgical debates and inside the world of academic anthropology, specifically, and secular academia in general.¹

In light of this change of standpoint, it is not surprising that here I will approach American Catholic worship from a different perspective than I did while still immersed in the worlds of liturgists. At that time,

¹Obviously my focus is on the social sciences, which I know best, and secondarily the humanities. These are also the fields liturgists most frequently look to for assistance or insight. Witvliet (1995) has provided a very thoughtful review of major issues liturgists must keep in mind when considering the incorporation of the methodological approaches of the social sciences. While some of my concerns parallel those he has raised, his standpoint is primarily theological in nature.

I emphasized what to me was a very striking and surprising phenomenon: the extraordinary degree to which academic liturgists had extensively employed a variety of anthropological concepts in their own work

This was clear in many ways, but I came upon the most amusing evidence of it at the 1995 Pastoral Liturgy Conference. One of the themes of the conference was the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Notre Dame Center for Pastoral Liturgy. At a general session, more than three hundred liturgists robustly sang a parody (written by Gabe Huck of Liturgy Training Publications) of the Notre Dame fight song, poking fun at some of the center's seminal figures and including the line: "Liminality, my dears, Gallen had thresholds up to his ears."² "Liminality" and "thresholds" are not theological terms, but concepts associated with a crosscultural theory of rites of passage elaborated and popularized by the eminent anthropologist Victor Turner. As the song suggests, this anthropological theory has become a keystone of liturgical thinking (i.e., heavily influencing liturgical thinking on key issues like baptism and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults).

In earlier works (Roberts 1995; 1996) I have suggested that a major reason many liturgical professionals may have been so ready to incorporate anthropological concepts like liminality into their own thinking was a fundamental *similarity* between those who become professional liturgists and those who become anthropologists. In particular, many in both professions share a strong sense of alienation from major sectors of mainstream Western society and a fascination with exotic others. On the basis of this similarity and the reliance of liturgists on anthropological ideas and data, I went on to argue that it was crucial that liturgists who wished to make use of anthropological insights in their own theory and practice be aware of some of the recent crises in anthropology and the self-criticisms that had emerged from those crises. For these crises and self-criticisms have led, in my view, to vast improvements in anthropological theory and practice—an emphasis on reflexivity (self-knowledge) and a sensitivity to issues of representation of the other—that desperately needed to be adopted by liturgical professionals.

After a year of almost total immersion in secular academia and anthropology, I wish to emphasize, instead, what I see as some of the significant, but sometimes overlooked, *differences* or *contrasts* between the concerns that pervade secular academia and those that should be of

²John Gallen is a former director of the Notre Dame Center for Pastoral Liturgy.

greatest significance to academically trained liturgists and others seriously concerned with American Catholic worship. Indeed, instead of emphasizing the pervasive self-criticisms that anthropologists and secular academics have leveled at themselves, I will offer some critical observations that are strikingly absent from their typical self-critique.

While I have great interest in the exciting intellectual issues raised in secular academia today, I believe it is essential that those of us concerned about American Catholic worship be very careful, critical, and, above all, skeptical before proposing and fostering changes in our worship life based on the present approaches to academic knowledge in areas like ritual and religion. By emphasizing that the forms of knowledge and academic theories that dominate the social sciences and humanities must be critically and skeptically evaluated by those committed to the Church, I also hope to draw attention to an overlooked issue that may be responsible for much of the mutual antagonism that has often accompanied efforts at liturgical renewal. Contrary to the accepted truths constantly repeated by many Catholic liturgists, one of the great issues facing the Church's worship life is *not* the "faithful's" lack of knowledge about religion and worship. Rather, it is a lack of recognition of the extraordinarily large number of competing forms and sources of knowledge on which the faithful may draw to develop their approaches to worship and religion. People's rejection of attempts at liturgical renewal may often be rooted in their as yet unstudied knowledge encounters during which they evaluate the legitimacy and relevance of knowledge coming from liturgical sources in comparison with the many other sources of knowledge available to them.

THE VIEW FROM INSIDE SECULAR ACADEMIA

My administrative interlude was frustrating, as it necessarily meant losing momentum on my research and losing contact with some good friends from the liturgical world. But there were some advantages to this interruption. Anthropological participant observation requires a creative and sometimes painful tension deriving from the attempt to be both a participant—actively involved (an insider)—and an observer—a somewhat detached analyst (an outsider). In the very controversial world of liturgy, when the researcher is a practicing Catholic, it is all too easy to slip into becoming a partisan participant or, at least, to be seen that way. I became acutely aware of the tensions inherent in being a participant-observer of American Catholic worship when I expanded my field for participant observation beyond the network of liturgists directly or indirectly associated with the

Notre Dame Center for Pastoral Liturgy and began work with the newly formed Society for Catholic Liturgy, whose members often are critical of some approaches taken at Notre Dame. Among the “attitudes and convictions” included in the Society for Catholic Liturgy’s statement of general philosophy is: “A respect for the complete historical tradition of Catholic liturgy, including that of the biblical, patristic, medieval and post-Tridentine eras, as well as an acknowledgment of strengths and values in the liturgical life of the church before the Second Vatican Council.” Considering some of the positions on liturgical issues taken by groups on the extreme liberal and conservative wings of the Catholic church, both the Notre Dame Center for Pastoral Liturgy and the Society for Catholic Liturgy should be characterized as moderates; certainly, that is how I believe both groups would honestly describe themselves. It was thus painful to hear some people associated with these two groups at times scornfully disparage each other’s character and work. It was also discouraging to know that because of this mindset there were first-rate liturgical scholars who, on the principle of not giving aid and comfort to the “enemy,” would consciously avoid publicly praising what they privately considered to be achievements of “opponents” and would purposely refrain from publicly criticizing what they privately considered flaws in the work of their allies.

As an anthropologist, I am aware that one of the most powerful political and cultural dynamics at work in the modern world is the construction of boundaries between groups—ethnic, religious, racial. I also know that the solidity or impermeability of the boundaries between groups does not necessarily reflect the size of the gap between them in terms of beliefs, values, backgrounds, behaviors, or histories. But to intellectually understand or analyze such a phenomenon does not make it easy to deal with it emotionally when it is seen at work among friends and colleagues.

As an academic administrator at a secular university watching the conflict-ridden liturgical world from a distance for a year, I was even more struck by the tragedy of this liturgical civil war. Fine people on all sides of the disputes within the Church were expending vast resources of energy, intelligence, and passion fighting each other while, from my vantage point in the university, it was increasingly clear that there were far more serious and powerful threats to widely shared values, beliefs, and commitments.

In the secular university, to which academically trained liturgists often looked for sources of non-liturgical knowledge, very fundamental institutional changes were occurring. These were taking place with

little serious discussion or significant resistance. There was a time when some of us believed that a major role of secular academia should be to provide a knowledgeable critique of society. Today, that seems a foolishly naive expectation. I have found, to my horror, that large corporations now provide the virtually unquestioned models that the university eagerly seeks to emulate. What is good for Ford is good for MSU, especially if it leads to major grants and contracts from the former to the latter. The old adage “publish or perish” has been replaced by publish *and* bring in more overhead to the university through grants and contracts or perish. Indeed, many meetings of the College of Social Science’s chairs and directors at Michigan State would have seemed familiar to mid-level corporate executives, as they focused on the never-ending and relentless search for new markets and clients for the research and consulting services of faculty. It was not surprising that the guest speaker at the undergraduate commencement ceremony for Michigan State’s College of Social Science in spring 1996 was an alumnus who was the head of a think tank with very significant financial resources. One reason he had been invited was clearly in the hope that he might provide some support for the college’s effort at marketing its faculty’s expertise. It was perfectly in line with these priorities when the guest speaker’s main point was that the graduating students should look upon their education as a form of capital to be carefully invested for maximum profit.

Indeed, university issues increasingly are framed almost exclusively in terms of pragmatic adjustments to assumed economic realities—for which no “realistic” alternatives are presumed to exist. Debates on basic moral issues that relate directly to how the university operates, much less effective acts of resistance that go beyond complaining among colleagues and friends, are virtually nonexistent or highly marginalized.

This was in striking contrast to what I had witnessed as an anthropological observer of American Catholic worship. When the Church made a decision or announcement on worship, the moral, theological, ethical, and faith implications were widely debated. Whether one agreed with the decision or with any of its major critics, conservative or liberal, it was impressive to see *the fervent concern for the institution of the Church that was expressed on all sides*. This concern was not necessarily for the preservation of the status quo of the Church. There is a great deal of research confirming the observation that a high percentage of American Catholics have remained in the Church despite fundamental and clearly stated disagreements with some of its official positions.

Sociologist Andrew Greeley (1990), for example, has reported on studies that suggest the 1975 halt to the striking decline in Catholic Sunday Mass attendance, which began in 1968 as a response to the papal birth control encyclical, did not occur because all who disagreed strongly with the encyclical had left the Church (see also Greeley 1996, 378). Clearly, they had not. Rather, Greeley and his colleague Hout speculated that many of those who remained generally were:

at the high end of the "loyalty" continuum . . . [and had] a disposition to stay with an institution even in the face of opposition from the leaders of the institution. At the low end is a disposition to disassociate oneself from the institution whose leadership endorses moral and political stands contrary to one's own convictions. People differ in their predisposition to make a choice to stay with an institution or to leave it when they disagree with the official position of that institution. . . . [Greeley and Hout thus speculated that] the decline in church attendance stopped precisely when all those whose "loyalty" was not strong enough to resist this pressure ["the disorganizing pressure of dissension within the Church"] had already cut down on their church going (and contributions and other forms of religious behavior) (Greeley 1990, 24–25).

It is worth adding that in his best-selling novels Greeley often graphically portrays this style of loyal opposition and resistance from the liberal wing of the Church, not only by the laity but by religious and priests (including two of his favorite fictional characters, Bishop "Blackie" Ryan and Sean Cardinal Cronin of Chicago). Greeley's novels also often feature central protagonists who have left the Church before or soon after Vatican II. In the course of the stories, they find themselves pleasantly surprised to discover how much the Church has changed (particularly with regard to respect for authority), but also dismayed at how much more change is needed.

In summarizing the lessons of their very recent national study *Laity, American and Catholic: Transforming the Church*, D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, and Wallace (1996) observed that:

a majority of the American Catholic laity is slowly moving in the direction of wanting a more democratic Church in which laypersons can participate at all levels. . . . Growing numbers of the laity have been abandoning the traditional positions demanded by the magisterium.

Even as they urge more democratic decision-making at all levels of Church structure, the ordination of women, the reactivation of married priests, and a more nuanced sexual morality, only a small

minority of all Catholics (less than 20 percent) said they were thinking of leaving the Church. They insist they are a part of the people of God, that this is their church too, and that it can and must be reformed (160).

However, in reviewing *Laity, American and Catholic: Transforming the Church for Commonweal*, Steinfels (1996), senior religion correspondent for the *New York Times*, argued that, for him, a major flaw in the book is that, with a few exceptions, it follows the typical trend of surveys of Catholic opinion by focusing almost exclusively on “‘practical’ questions of sex, ordination of married men and of women, approval of the pope, and politics” (17). While these are clearly tied to important theological issues, Steinfels observed that “the authors have shied away from probing” other absolutely core issues. He noted that the authors asked those being surveyed whether they thought a person can be a good Catholic without going to Church every Sunday, obeying Church teaching on birth control, divorce and remarriage, abortion, etc. Steinfels wondered, however, what would have happened “if they had added a few items like ‘without believing that Jesus rose bodily from the dead’ or ‘without believing that Jesus is truly present in Eucharist under the appearances of bread and wine?’” (1996, 17).

This was clearly a rhetorical question for Steinfels. He concluded his review by focusing on the chapters of the book that he considered most valuable. Those were written by James D. Davidson, a sociologist, and include material from that co-author’s own research. Steinfels emphasized Davidson’s findings on the beliefs and knowledge of Catholics of the post-Vatican II generation. Steinfels observed that Davidson found that this generation had only a “meager knowledge of Catholicism.” According to Steinfels:

Davidson reports that post-Vats simply “lack a vocabulary to help them form a Catholic identity and interpret their Catholic experiences.” He contrasts this with an older generation’s fund of terms, from mortal and venial sin to holy days of obligation, confession, and Stations of the Cross—“a common language with which to communicate with one another about their Catholic experiences” (19).

RESISTANCE AND KNOWLEDGE: THE AMERICAN SECULAR ACADEMY AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Although they may appear to be an odd couple, these issues of resistance and knowledge together capture two of my major observations

about American Catholic worship as observed from the secular academy. In particular, the contrast between the extraordinarily high level of *resistance* to the authority of the Church and the general passive acquiescence to institutional authority within the university is painfully ironic. Resistance to the power of authority and an associated emphasis on individual agency are among the most trendy and fashionable of current areas for the production of knowledge (i.e., topics for theory and research) by anthropologists and social scientists in general. Indeed, scholars now seem to be able to find resistance and individual agency everywhere.

While I could explore the reasons for this extraordinary contrast, my primary concern here is not with the gap between the theory and practice of secular academics or even with the whole subject of resistance and individual agency. Rather, I believe it is essential to begin considering some of the ramifications of the very trendiness of knowledge production in the secular academy for those in the liturgical community who regularly call upon the authority of anthropology or the social sciences to support their approaches to issues that touch upon the worship life of the Church. It is important to recall that it was not many years ago that the academic knowledge factory was generally ignoring resistance and individual agency and, instead, churning out articles and books emphasizing exactly the opposite perspective on the individual's relationship to society or culture, e.g., aggressively retailing various brands and styles of structuralism, functionalism, Marxism, Freudianism, behaviorism, which now seem as quaint and out-of-date as platform shoes and Nehru jackets. I am not suggesting that we turn our backs on the current intellectual fashions of secular academia as we struggle with the many vital issues that challenge the Church's worship life. Obviously, in my own work I have tried to bring some of those recent ideas from anthropology to the attention of the liturgical community. Also, I am certainly not suggesting that we try to protect the "simple faithful" from these "pernicious influences," even if that were possible. Rather, I am suggesting that those who need to be most skeptical about these fashions in knowledge are those who are naturally most tempted to adopt abstract and complex theories and concepts that are undoubtedly exciting and stimulating in and of themselves—intellectuals within the Church. It is essential to continually remind ourselves why the shelf-life of those exciting ideas often is so short.

They emerge out of institutions and disciplines that have a very different purpose and very different things at stake than the Church, which is ultimately concerned with eternal verities and salvation.

These institutions and disciplines reserve their highest rewards for those *individuals* who are most theoretically innovative and daring, scholars on the cutting edge, who produce novel and attractive products in a highly competitive knowledge market. Where rapid change, often for its own sake, is highly valued and a style of individual intellectual entrepreneurship is far more fashionable than long-term commitment to an institution, it is not surprising that intense initial enthusiasm for ideas is so often soon followed by militant and scornful rejection of them and a conversion to a newer intellectual “white hope.”

Although these ideas had been percolating through my mind throughout the last year, I had hesitated to present them, as they are certainly heretical within the secular academy and likely to be misunderstood as anti-intellectual by some within the Church. I was emboldened, however, when a reference in Giles’ *American Catholic Arts and Fictions* (1992, 507) recently led me to a letter with a similar message written by Flannery O’Connor, an author often quoted with approval by those on both the liberal and conservative wings of the Catholic Church. Responding to a young poet who, as a freshman in college, found that he was losing his faith, O’Connor (1979) appropriately told a story about two other poets:

[Robert] Bridges once wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins and asked him to tell him how he, Bridges, could believe. He must have expected from Hopkins a long philosophical answer. Hopkins wrote back, “Give alms.” He was trying to say to Bridges that God is to be experienced in Charity (in the sense of love for the divine image in human beings). Don’t get so entangled with intellectual difficulties that you fail to look for God in this way (476–7).

But O’Connor went on to emphasize that:

The intellectual difficulties have to be met. . . . [O’Connor referred to her own] sense of the immense sweep of creation, of the evolutionary process in everything, or how incomprehensible God must necessarily be to be the God of heaven and earth. You can’t fit the Almighty into your intellectual categories.

O’Connor recommended a

stretching of the imagination that you need to make you a sceptic in the face of much that you are learning, much of which is new and shocking but which when boiled down becomes less so and

takes its place in the general scheme of things. What kept me a sceptic in college was precisely my Christian faith. It always said: wait, don't bite on this, get a wider picture, continue to read. . . . Much of the criticism of belief that you find today comes from people who are judging it from the standpoint of another and narrower discipline. . . . Learn what you can, but cultivate Christian scepticism. It will keep you free—not free to do anything you please, but free to be formed by something larger than your own intellect or the intellects of those around you (477–8).

WHOSE MEAGER KNOWLEDGE?:
KNOWLEDGE ENCOUNTERS AND LITURGICAL RENEWAL

To this point, I have been advocating a cautious and skeptical appraisal by liturgists and others interested in the Church's worship life of knowledge emerging from anthropology and the social sciences. I want to conclude, however, by emphasizing the need for those same groups to also look carefully at other forms of knowledge, in particular the laity's knowledge about religion and worship. My suggestions here are ones developed jointly over the last year with Michael McCallion, director of the Office of Worship of the Archdiocese of Detroit. McCallion, a sociologist and a liturgist, recently completed a Ph.D. dissertation (1996) in which he analyzed the strikingly different ways in which suburban and inner city parishes in Detroit have approached the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

In our previous research, we both had found that liturgical professionals were frequently preoccupied with how to respond to a variety of serious objections to their versions of liturgical renewal (whether it be issues of inclusive language or interpretations of the mandate for full, conscious, active participation of the assembly). We were particularly struck by how consistently liturgists continued to propose the same solutions to the opposition they faced. How do you get people to move from point A to point B liturgically, spiritually, and ecclesially? The liturgists' answer was all too often clear and straightforward: more education. If people only knew more, most of their objections would disappear. If they object to learning more—at least more of what the liturgists wish to teach them—it is because they are afraid of change, and the objections of such fearful people must not be allowed to interfere with the progress of liturgical renewal.

Our previous research suggests that, from an anthropological and sociological perspective, such a formulation radically simplifies a very complex sociocultural reality. Indeed, by habitually equating opposition to their efforts with ignorance and/or fear of change, this ap-

proach may well have contributed to the rancor that all too often has accompanied efforts at implementing liturgical renewal. We suggest a radically different approach. We conceptualize the process of liturgical implementation as knowledge encounters in which professional ministers and ordinary pew dwellers alike evaluate and respond to the theological, spiritual, sociological, political, and aesthetic assumptions that underlie many liturgical proposals on the basis of a variety of alternative, indeed competing, sources and forms of knowledge.³ From an anthropological and sociological perspective, in fact, one of the most formidable challenges to understanding the responses of American Catholics to particular proposals for liturgical renewal is evaluating the role of the vast number of alternative sources of knowledge potentially available to them.

It is a commonplace observation that the United States has become a learning society, with knowledge expanding and/or being revised so continually and rapidly that a major goal of formal schooling has to be learning how to learn, preparing for a life-long process of “continuing” education. While this trend is usually discussed in terms of technological change or general job-related skills, it is also a powerful force influencing how people think and feel about their religious beliefs and commitments.

American Catholics who want to keep up with “Church issues” can choose from a vast selection of publications produced by an extraordinarily diverse official and unofficial Catholic press. Current debates over liturgical issues are a frequent subject of articles and books in genres ranging from the devotional to the scholarly (see Haas 1995, 337–44 for an annotated listing limited to only “Conservative Catholic Periodicals”). Liturgical issues are also addressed in the myriad of workshops, courses, and retreats regularly offered by a wide variety of Catholic institutions (e.g., parishes, dioceses, colleges and universities). Normally, Johnson (1996) may be correct in claiming that “there is not much in the liturgical year to raise eyebrows or sell papers. Religion does not lend itself to front-page or top-of-broadcast coverage” (9). However, even those who seldom if ever read Catholic publications or rarely participate in Church activities find Catholic liturgical issues featured in articles under banner headlines in the mainline

³The phrase “knowledge encounters” was used in an invitation from Pauline Peters to Ann Ferguson to present a paper at a workshop on “Knowledge Encounters: Ideas and Practices in Development Sites” at the Harvard Institute for International Development. Dr. Ferguson, a colleague in the department of anthropology at Michigan State University, suggested that the phrase “knowledge encounters” nicely captured the central dynamics that McCallion and I proposed to study.

secular media whenever the Vatican issues a controversial statement (e.g., on ordination of women, female altar servers, or inclusive language). As more and more American Catholics have obtained a college education, frequently attending secular institutions, they have taken courses or even specialized in fields like anthropology, sociology, psychology, or comparative religion that offer their own disciplinary analyses of issues that directly or indirectly touch on liturgical concerns: the nature of religion, myth, and ritual. These are also the subjects of widely read books (even best-sellers) and popular television series that focus on a variety of forms of spirituality associated, for example, with the women's and the men's movements, as well as with New Age approaches. In addition to Greeley, whose romances and mysteries were mentioned above, there are many popular Catholic novelists who use their fiction as an opportunity to comment on these issues. R. McNerny of the department of philosophy at Notre Dame University is an example of a scholar/mystery writer who is situated at a very different place on the spectrum of American Catholic opinion than Greeley. Strikingly, the long-distance romance at the heart of one of Jon Hassler's most recent novels, *Dear James* (1991), began when the two central protagonists both wrote letters to an international Catholic newspaper "to express their objection to liturgical reform" (302).

American Catholics are, of course, in frequent and intimate contact with sources of liturgical or ritual knowledge that are much closer to home and emerge out of daily experiences powerfully influenced by ethnicity, social class, generation, and gender: their families, networks of friends, and neighborhoods. These sources provide liturgical theologies of the streets or domus (Orsi 1985, xxii) that may differ radically not only in content but in form from the more precisely articulated, abstract, and logically ordered systems of knowledge liturgists generally present in their written materials.

The above is just a very preliminary and limited listing of widely available and frequently competing sources and forms of knowledge on liturgical issues. Yet, even this superficial examination makes very evident how truly complex and problematic the knowledge encounters routinely occurring during the last twenty-five years of liturgical renewal in the Post-Vatican II American Catholic Church have been.

Two key questions concerning these encounters need to be carefully addressed: (1) In the light of this abundance of competing forms and sources of knowledge, *what* sort of sense have American Catholics made of the crucial issues of worship? (2) *How* have American Catholics gone about making sense out of this myriad of sources and forms of knowledge? We emphasize *sense making* because, on the basis of our

own research as well as much recent work in the social sciences, we understand knowledge encounters as processes in which all parties involved are thinking, feeling, and, above all, active participants or agents, not simply donors or recipients of knowledge. We pose two primary questions (What? and How?) because, viewed as processes, the study of knowledge encounters requires not only an understanding of the content of knowledge per se, but also an analysis of “the ways in which . . . [knowledge’s] presence is socially attested . . . who claims to know what, how such claims are evaluated, legitimated, and accepted, and their consequences for social relations, especially for power, morality, and . . . social accountability” (Lambek 1993, 10). Clearly, the above questions are particularly crucial when on matters of worship an ever-increasing proportion of American Catholics apparently view themselves to be what Schutz has called “the well-informed citizen who considers himself [or herself] perfectly qualified to decide who *is* a competent expert and even to make up his [or her] mind after having listened to opposing expert opinions” (1971, 123).

We intend to study these two key questions about knowledge encounters and liturgical renewal primarily through long-term, intensive participant observation in a small number of parishes in the Archdiocese of Detroit. Such an approach can foster the solid trust between researchers and a community that is indispensable when dealing with the highly personal, intimate, and sometimes controversial issues that liturgical knowledge encounters have involved.

For the vast majority of American Catholics, their most significant knowledge encounters with liturgists’ expertise have occurred when some new proposal for liturgical renewal is about to become their own local reality, and what the liturgists have so carefully worked out and imagined on paper is to be embodied and incorporated into the complex reality of the worship life of a particular parish and its parishioners. In-depth knowledge of a parish and individual parishioners is necessary if we are to begin to understand *how* parishioners actually interpret and respond to the variety of liturgical concepts, perspectives, and practices they have been exposed to over the last several decades. While this research will focus on contemporary parish knowledge encounters, it will also examine them in their historical contexts. Our previous research strongly suggests that parishes’ and parishioners’ responses to current liturgical proposals are very much influenced by their previous experiences with competing forms and sources of knowledge, as well as by their personal experiences of the ways in which liturgical renewal has been implemented. Thus, our research on knowledge encounters will include social histories of the

parishes and life histories of parishioners as they relate to liturgical renewal.

CONCLUSION

The particular research I have just described will only begin to deal with our current meager knowledge about the American Catholic laity's knowledge and beliefs about worship. Clearly, the particular concepts and theories on which this and similar projects are to be based must be subjected to the same skeptical analysis that I have proposed above. I hope that our skepticism about our own efforts will be fueled by our recognition of the ultimate issues that are at stake for those we study and for ourselves.

Whether evaluating the knowledge emerging from anthropology and the social sciences or data about the laity's knowledge, in the final analysis, it is essential to keep in mind an often-overlooked distinction between two forms of relativism—cultural relativism and ethical relativism. Cultural relativism is about *understanding*. Particular beliefs, values, forms of behavior, and knowledge must be understood within their wider cultural/societal context. When placed in that context, what appeared bizarre or irrational when viewed in isolation may seem quite logical. Ethical relativism is about *judgment*. If particular beliefs, values, forms of behavior, and knowledge are considered acceptable or even exemplary by a particular group, outsiders must honor that judgment. A fundamental commitment to cultural relativism as a means of dealing with differences (e.g., in knowledge and beliefs about Catholic worship) does *not* necessitate, however, a commitment to ethical relativism. Indeed, an acceptance of ethical relativism would seem antithetical to the core values of those of us who try to live, work, and worship within the Roman Catholic tradition.

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