

What We Have Seen and Heard and Touched

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Introduction

This year's Institute of Liturgical Studies has been carrying on an extended conversation on the relation between liturgy, witness, and service. It is a pleasure to join that conversation as a liturgist for whom liturgical catechesis of adults has been a longstanding avocation.

What I have been asked to contribute to the final moments of the conversation is this: to draw out some themes for a liturgical catechesis that will help form our people and ourselves more deeply in the ways of worship and so equip us for mission and witness. My remarks are organized under three headings: 1) the connection between liturgy, witness, and catechesis; 2) worship; and 3) catechesis.

The Connection

The question we are wrestling with is how liturgy relates to witness, service, and now catechesis. Let me begin by saying that I believe that the relationship need not be an adversarial one, or one of conflict. I assume, rather, that there is and ought to be an intrinsic and supportive connection between them, that all these functions of ministry are bound together by a common pastoral charge to make disciples of all peoples. But rather than argue that conviction, let me illustrate it with a familiar and compelling Gospel story.

Late Easter Sunday afternoon two disciples were on their way to Emmaus. Their journey was not one of Easter joy, but one of flight and deep disillusionment summed up in those poignant words, "We had hoped that he would be the one." An unrecognized Stranger joined them on their way, drew out their story of lost hope, and broke open the scriptures to help them interpret what had happened. And when they prevailed upon the Stranger, who had so quietly hosted their hurt on the way, to be their guest for the evening meal, he turned the tables on them and did for

them what only a host would do--he took bread, said the blessing, broke the bread, and gave it to them. In his gift of that morsel of bread they received something far greater, the gift of faith, a gift that had to be shared without delay with the others in Jerusalem from whose company they had fled.

Notice what lies at the heart of the story: befriending, catechesis, the table ritual, and witness. Take note as well of the critical role played by the breaking of the bread. It was at that moment that "their eyes were opened," that "the Lord was known to them." Exegetes tell us that their recognition of the Stranger was a faith-recognition. It was in that moment that they came to Easter faith in Jesus as the Risen Lord. Further, it was only in that moment of recognition that they were finally able to name the impact of the catechesis that had taken place along the way. "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" And it was only then that they felt compelled to retrace their steps back to Jerusalem to give witness to the rest.

What we have in Lk. 24:13-35 is a beautifully crafted, fully elaborated version of a story told more sparsely and far less tellingly in Mk. 16:12. Why such care in telling it here? Did the early community perhaps hear in the story of these two anonymous disciples the echoes of their own journey to full Easter faith, just as we still do today?

It is that paradigmatic function of the Emmaus story that raises questions for me when I am pressed into service to do liturgical catechesis for adults. What kind of catechesis do we need today to ready ourselves and our people for that moment of faith-recognition in our worship? And when we gather to worship, how are we to celebrate so that we may come to know the Lord in the breaking of the bread and feel compelled to go out and spread the news? Let me take up those two questions in reverse order.

Worship

How ought we celebrate the liturgy so that it can become a place of the Lord's self-disclosure to us?

The liturgy itself gives us a starting point. We are all familiar with the literal meaning of the word "liturgy"--the public work of the people. There is a dynamism in that word, as I have noted elsewhere.

Liturgy is not a thing. It is the act of a people who gather with the Risen Lord to keep covenant with God--to hear God's word, to pray, to offer thanks and praise for the marvelous thing God has done for us in Jesus, and to leave on mission. It is a moment in which we lift up the outward deeds and inner movements of our daily lives to allow them to be enlightened with a Gospel word and to be signed with a gesture of dying and rising. Liturgy is a verb, filled with a people's celebrating and living.¹

We need to flip that over and look at it from the other side as well, for the liturgy is ultimately not simply ours. At its core and foundation, liturgy is God's deed in Jesus, revealing to us a word of judgement and liberation, transforming and gracing our lives and making of us a covenant people. Liturgy is a verb, filled with God's doing and coming among us to save us.

Note how God's deed toward us and our response to God are both caught up in this dual schema. God's becoming human in Jesus and our being deified in him, that "*sacrum commercium*" which was such a favorite theme of the Fathers of the Church, is mirrored and accomplished for us in the liturgy. The gift exchange God has begun in Jesus finds continuing fulfillment there.

1. G. Ost diek, *Catechesis for Liturgy. A Program for Parish Involvement* (Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1986) 3.

That is why I find Paul's words in II Cor. 1:18-22 to be such an apt description of liturgy. There Paul uses the image of a "yes" to make his point when he writes: "Whatever promises God has made have been fulfilled in him; therefore it is through him that we address our Amen to God when we worship together" (I Cor. 1:20). As I have suggested elsewhere,

Jesus is a single, two-way "yes"--God's "yes" to us and our human family's "yes" to God. Jesus continues to voice and embody that "yes" in the words and deeds of our liturgical celebrations.²

Traditionally we have often summed all this up by saying that the liturgy celebrates the dying and rising of Jesus; it is the memorial of his death and resurrection. But, as Elaine Ramshaw points out,

This liturgical remembrance is a unique sort of memory: a memory which does not just reminisce but represents, makes present; a memory which by recalling the promises of the past also recalls our future hope.³

If the act of God in Jesus' dying and rising is made present to us in our celebration, must not the Crucified and Risen One who acts be there as well, in the word

2. Ostdiek, *Catechesis* 51.

3. E. Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) 93. For brief commentary on the concept of remembrance, see: B. van Iersel, "Some Biblical Roots of the Christian Sacraments," in E. Schillebeeckx (ed.), *The Sacraments in General. A New Perspective (Concilium 31)* (New York: Paulist Press, 1968) 5-20; and J. Reumann, *The Supper of the Lord. The New Testament, Ecumenical Dialogues, and Faith and Order on Eucharist* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1985) 26-34.

proclaimed to us, in sacrament shared, in the assembly and ministers acting in his name?⁴

We find ourselves thus confronted with the pastoral question, how are we to conduct our celebration so that we may come to know the Lord in the breaking of the bread and feel compelled to go out and spread the news?

In searching out an answer for our assemblies we will not risk missing the mark, I believe, if we keep in mind what our ancient tradition tells about our sacraments. Sacraments are the visible signs of an invisible grace. God's saving presence and grace are conveyed to us through the medium of palpable human actions which make use of the tangible things of this creation, just as God's word is spoken to us in the human words of a prophet or an evangelist.

In current usage, however, the meaning of sign falls far short of what that word has traditionally meant. In the ancient church sacraments were rather understood to be symbols, or better symbolic actions, which embody and make available the hidden reality they symbolize. That reality is, ultimately, the very gift of the Godself. Even as they veil that grace, sacraments disclose it; and in disclosing it they enact God's self-offering to us. The communicative function of the sacramental symbols seems, then, to be of crucial pastoral importance for us.⁵

4. See Vatican Council II, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, #7. The theme of multiple manifestations or modes of expression of Christ's presence in the liturgy has become a commonplace in Catholic theology since the council.

5. For a sample of current thinking on the symbolic character of liturgy, see D. Power, *Unsearchable Riches: The Symbolic Nature of Liturgy* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984).

If we wish to insure a celebration of our sacraments that is fully communicative, we can not afford to lose sight of the twin roots of their symbolism.⁶ The Christian sacraments, so recent historical research tells us, are ritualized forms of typical human behavior--dining, bathing, touching, anointing--which have been shaped and transformed into symbol actions through a long history of human and religious usage leading to the pre-Christian rites of Judaism. But there is a second root as well. These rituals undergo a further critical transformation at the hands of Jesus and the early community to become the Christian sacraments we have received from that founding period.

The implications for good pastoral celebration seem clear. Our symbols must be fully authentic and honest, faithful to their human origins. If I may quote from a document on environment and art in worship issued by the U. S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops:

Every word, gesture, movement, object, appointment must be real in the sense that it is our own. It must come from the deepest understanding of ourselves (not careless, phony, counterfeit, pretentious, exaggerated, etc.). Liturgy has suffered historically from a kind of minimalism and an overriding concern for efficiency, partly because sacramental causality and efficacy have been emphasized at the expense of sacramental significance. As our symbols tended in practice to shrivel up and petrify, they became much more manageable and efficient. They still "caused," were still "efficacious" even though they had often ceased to signify in the richest, fullest sense.⁷

6. K. Osborne, "Methodology and the Christian Sacraments," *Worship* 48 (1974) 536-549.

7. Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1978) #14.

That is the first requirement: good pastoral liturgy needs sacramental symbols that are rich and full, authentically human, able to speak to us in a language we understand.

The second requisite of sacramental celebrations follows from their New Testament origins. Sacraments are not just our actions; it is the Lord Jesus who acts in them. Sacraments must be able to disclose the Word of God made flesh among us in Jesus of Nazareth and offered to us in his death and resurrection as the source of new life. Hospitable human symbols are not enough. What is required, to again quote the NCCB document on environment and art, is that the symbols be performed in such fashion that we are invited to "see beyond the face of the person or thing, a sense of the holy, the numinous, mystery."⁸ The analogy that always comes to mind for me is the question to be asked by the youngest child at the Jewish Seder: why is this night different from every other night? The way in which the sacrament is performed ought tease us into asking that same question. Two things serve to trigger that question. The first is the obvious care with which our symbols are prepared, presented, and celebrated, and the second is the contagious faith and prayerfulness with which the assembly, and especially its ministers, dwell in the symbols.⁹

In urging that our symbols show these two characteristics, I do not mean to suggest that our liturgical celebrations should be wildly innovative and filled with creative surprises every Sunday. Rather, as the environment and art document says,

8. BCL, *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, #12.

9. A related issue not touched here is the interplay between subjective meaning and the objective mystery in the experience of celebration. For a thoughtful discussion, see: M. Searle, "Faith and Sacraments in the Conversion Process," in R. Duggan (ed.), *Conversion and the Catechumenate* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984) 64-84.

Renewal requires the opening up of our symbols, especially the fundamental ones of bread and wine, water, oil, the laying on of hands, until we can experience all of them as authentic and appreciate their symbolic value.¹⁰

Two things stand out as important in answering our question. The fundamental symbols must be full, and they need to be broken open for the assembly by our obvious care for them and by our sense of faith-filled prayer. To put it another way, it is simply a matter of performing common actions and using common things with an uncommon sensitivity, both human and Christian.¹¹

It may be good for me to take out a moment now to acknowledge what you have probably already detected. A perspective inherited along with my own Augustinian-Franciscan tradition undoubtedly colors what I have been saying.¹² In that perspective there is a deep potential for sacramentalism which lies at the very core of the creatured being of everyone and everything. The Incarnation is certainly a unique instance of God's presence to us in a creature, but might the Incarnation not also serve as a paradigm to reveal a wider potential for sacramentalism? Sacraments find their paradigm in the mystery of the Word-made-flesh, where Jesus' humanity discloses and presents the unseen God to us in all that Jesus is, says, and does. Sacraments are the living memorial of Jesus' paschal mystery, that final moment of God's self-disclosure and self-gift sealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And celebration of the sacraments is the

10. BCL, *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, #15.

11. See BCL, *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, #55.

12. Others such as Langdon Gilkey, "Symbols, Meaning, and the Divine Presence," *Theological Studies* 35 (1974) 249-267, might also be cited in support of this viewpoint.

experience to which we return again and again, that we might hear and see with our eyes and touch with our hands that Word of life, the Word of life we are to proclaim (1 Jn. 1:1).

But several cautions are in order here. In another Gospel passage the Risen Lord also assures us, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (Jn. 20:31). Our experience of the Lord whom we come to know in the breaking of the bread is never direct or unmediated. Only in faith do we recognize him among us. Coming to know him as Lord must at the same time be a coming to know ourselves as believers and disciples.

Further, the Lord who is present in the breaking of the bread is also the one who has vanished from our sight, who has gone ahead. The eucharist we share is only a "foretaste of a feast to come." In comment on those words of the hymn, Elaine Ramshaw adds

That is the liturgical way of saying that the sacraments make the promises of God palpable, give them form, flavor, wetness, and the warmth of human touch. The sacraments are the embodiment of the "already" element in the "already-not yet" paradox of Christian eschatology.¹³

Our eucharist also remains a "hungry feast."¹⁴ Even as we find strength for life and witness in that foretaste of the "already," we also sense an unsatisfied hunger which ought to challenge us to seek and serve a justice that is "not yet" realized among us in our kingdom-living. We have not yet come to where Christ has arrived. Even in the best of liturgies we can expect to experience the absence of the Lord as part and parcel of our experience

13. Ramshaw 95.

14. G. Lathrop, "The Eucharist as a 'Hungry Feast' and the Appropriateness of our Want," *Living Worship* 13 (November 1977).

of his presence and as a forceful reminder of the unfinished agenda of our service for the kingdom.¹⁵

And while we are at it, there is another caution we might add. At the Supper Jesus commanded us to do the table rite he had performed as our memorial of him. But that table rite was part of the larger Jewish system of food-language which Jesus had often subverted in his own table ministry, transforming it into a language of pardon and inclusion.¹⁶ We can expect that the Lord with whom we sit down at table will continue to challenge our narrow and often exclusivist definitions of who is worthy to sup with him.

The moment of recognizing him in the breaking of the bread can be a moment of deep faith and consolation; it can also be a painful moment of judgment and challenge. It is never for ourselves alone, for if we have truly met him, we must go out to be his witnesses and to serve others in his name.

Catechesis

What kind of catechesis do we need today to ready our ourselves and our people for that moment of faith-recognition in our worship and for its consequent demand for witness and service?

In trying to answer that question, it may be helpful to note at the outset that our focus is on mystagogical catechesis, not the fuller range of catechesis one would

15. One of our temptations is to settle for a liturgy in which we feel comfortable with those of our own kind, to the neglect of our call to accept a mission of social outreach and justice. See J. Egan, "Liturgy and Justice: An Unfinished Agenda," *Origins* 13 #15 (Sept. 22, 1983) 246-253.

16. See G. Feeley-Harnik, *The Lord's Table. Eucharist and Passover in Early Christianity*. (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1981).

hope to find in catechumenal programs or programs of Christian religious education in a parish.

It is also important, I believe, to distinguish two forms of liturgical catechesis. Liturgy itself has a formative power; catechesis takes place in and through the celebration. Proclaiming and preaching the word, celebrating the sacramental memorial of the One whose life story we commit ourselves to follow, performing mutual service within the assembly, exercising priestly prayer for the world, and accepting the parting commission to serve others--all these repeated liturgical experiences work powerfully to shape and direct our Christian lives. We are already accustomed to thinking of the liturgical event as "first theology," or "theology being born," to use a phrase of Aidan Kavanagh.¹⁷ By that same token, can we not also call liturgy "first catechesis," a "catechesis being born"? Liturgy well celebrated already breaks open the symbols and invites us into a process of interaction with them and through them with the God whom they disclose to us.

Our concern here is with another form of liturgical catechesis, a "second catechesis" which is not unlike "second theology," in that it deliberately sets out to reflect on the meaning the liturgy has for us. Its function is to continue that process of breaking open the meaning of the symbols already set underway in the celebration itself. Its goal is to deepen that meaning and to prepare us to celebrate it more fully when we gather in the future and to live it more faithfully when we are out on mission in our world living as God's pilgrim people.

How can we go about doing such a catechesis? There seem to be few ready-made catechetical approaches at hand. Though attractive, the solution of adopting traditional educational methods and strategies seems inadequate to attain the goals of this kind of catechesis. "Banking education," as Paulo Freire characterizes traditional

17. A. Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1984) 74.

education, is content to deposit information in passive receptacles called students. Catechesis of that sort could easily be content to fill our minds with information, with many ideas about what liturgy ought to mean, without ever helping us to know and experience that meaning from within.

It would be far more useful, I believe, to model our liturgical catechesis on the mystagogical catechesis of the early church. Mystagogia, as you will recall, took place after adult converts had received the sacraments of initiation. The bishop met regularly with the neophytes during the Easter season to draw out the meaning of the sacraments they had received. It was their first full explanation of the sacraments. This model, revised and adjusted to our situation with the help of adult learning theory¹⁸ and ritual studies on nonverbal communication, still seems to hold great promise. It has served as an inspiration to me and has been of great help as I have wrestled with a number of issues in liturgical catechesis.

The first issue flows from the very nature of liturgical celebration, from the way in which liturgy communicates meaning. Liturgy is symbolic ritual action, including both ritual gesture and ritual word. Like all ritual, liturgy conveys meaning by enacting it, rather than just saying it. And the meaning which liturgy enacts symbolically is rich and ambiguous, in keeping with the multivalent quality characteristic of all symbols.

Symbols thus put us in touch with reality by exposing us to the ambiguous richness of an "other" whom we encounter in the symbolic action. The strategy of symbols is an ambiguous one: we are led deeper into the complexity of what *is* and what is *real*. For

18. For an example, see: T. Groome, *Christian Religious Education. Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980). His thought is nicely summarized in an earlier article entitled "Christian Education: A Task of Present Dialectical Hermeneutics," *Living Light* 14 (1977) 408-423.

this reason, symbols do not explain; they tantalize, tease the human imagination into new ways of seeing, knowing, being and having.... symbols require one to search and struggle for meaning....¹⁹

If that is the strategy of symbols, they place special demands on the catechetical process. We need a mystagogical catechesis that will not just talk about the meaning of liturgical symbols, but rather one that will help us to learn their ways, to dwell more fully within them.

The second issue arises from the growing practice of enlisting volunteers from among the local assembly to serve as a liturgy committee which prepares the liturgical celebrations. At times these volunteers are inadequately prepared for this task and can easily fall into blindly and mechanically repeating and implementing the ideas and suggestions proposed by an expert without taking account of the special circumstances of the local community itself.

We need to find ways to empower local directors and ministers of liturgy, in keeping with their resources, to provide a catechesis which will serve the particular mystagogical needs of their liturgy committees and congregations. This suggests that we develop a flexible approach easily tailored to local needs and resources.

The third issue is one that may be fairly peculiar to my own church. A little over twenty years ago Vatican II restored the use of vernacular in our liturgy. In the aftermath of that reform, we have become enamored of words, particularly words that explain, instruct and admonish. Commentaries explain the readings before we hear them, and in so doing absolve us from listening. We also have our counterpart of psychobabble, a kind of

19. N. Mitchell, *Cult and Controversy: The Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass (Studies in the Reformed Rites of the Catholic Church, Volume IV)* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1982) 52-53.

holybabble that sometimes threatens to seep into all the crevices and unclaimed silences of our services.

The antidote is clear: a return to more symbolic and evocative language, and especially a recovery of a modicum of the prayerful silence and wide range of sensory, non-verbal languages which lent an essential, though often unnoted, effectiveness to our earlier liturgy's ability to communicate. Liturgical catechesis, at least in our church, would do well to help us attend once again to the non-didactic and non-verbal ways in which the liturgy speaks to us.

Before going on to the next issue, I would like to pause to describe and illustrate an approach which I have found useful in liturgical catechesis.²⁰

The process has three steps: 1) attending to what we and others actually experience at liturgy; 2) reflecting on what our experience and that of others means; and 3) applying what we have learned to future celebration of the liturgy. In the first step people are asked to attend, both personally and together, to their liturgical experience through some form of reminiscence or guided experience. The point of this is to recover that liturgical experience so that the meaning enacted in it can be the basis of reflection. A procedure of first describing the experience before trying to name its inner meaning insures respect for the very way in which symbols work. In the second, reflective stage that inner meaning is drawn out and explored more fully, first from the shared experiences of the group, and then from the scriptures and longer tradition of the Christian community. The final, application step channels any new-found appreciation back into how the community celebrates liturgy and lives out its witness and service.

Let me illustrate the first phases of the process with a few examples. A good starting point for doing a catechesis on the meaning of liturgical objects is to use

20. For a fuller account, see: Ostdiek 13-20.

those objects in a guided exercise. Each object is displayed in a prayerful and attentive way, the object is then presented to the people individually for their response, if possible, and a poetic reflection is read after the object has been used.²¹ Using a series of objects such as incense, the sign of the cross, the lectern, the lectionary, water, oil, table, tablecloth, candle, cup and plate, bread and wine, and incense forms a coherent liturgy of "word" and "initiatory sacraments" that quickly gets people in touch with the deep seated meaning they have experienced through these objects. That meaning can be surfaced and named by first asking people to describe the experience and then to name what it says to them.

The experience of the seasons of the liturgical year can be easily recovered in a shared reverie in which people are led to recall the special songs, practices, sights, and moods of a season.²² Again, description of the remembered experience readily opens people to naming the inner meaning it has for them.

A fantasy reverie in which the people are guided through the lighting of the new fire at the Easter Vigil on the front steps of a church located in the middle of the community's cemetery, as medieval churches often were, is a powerful way to uncover the interlocking experiences of assembly, symbolic action, and word that lie at the heart of the liturgy. The experience of moving, in reverie, from being alone to being gathered for the ritual, from darkness to light, and from death to life fills the

21. Good poetic texts for these exercises can be found in *Assembly* 6 #3 (1979) and 8 #1 (1981).

22. For sample lead questions see Y. Cassa, J. Sanders, *Groundwork: Planning Liturgical Seasons* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1982) 15.

words which bring the reverie to a close, "Christ yesterday, today, and forever."²³ And the power of those words stands out all the more because they give voice to the experience.

In each of these illustrations, the experience of the people is recovered as the starting point for a shared reflection on what that experience has meant, first for them and then for their community throughout its history, in order to open up the meaning of the symbols in the fullest possible way.

The final issue I wish to name arises from the very strategy of this kind of liturgical catechesis. Any method which starts with reflection on our liturgical experience depends on the quality of that experience. Effective catechesis assumes that good liturgical experience is in place; it can not break open a meaning which the liturgy does not communicate.

What this suggests to me is that we need an in-between pastoral strategy which starts with the liturgical ministers and relies on a ripple effect. I take it to be true that the quality of a celebration depends in large measure on how the liturgical ministers exercise their roles. Their faith, their prayerfulness, their ritual care and hospitality are critical in modeling for the assembly and inviting them into the inner meaning of the liturgical symbols. Liturgical formation and catechesis of the liturgical ministers ought to be the first step in the strategy. The assembly will be able to profit most fully from their own catechesis once a good experience of the liturgy is in place for them to reflect on.

Whatever catechetical strategies or methods we may choose, what seems essential is that we find a way to open up the symbols of the liturgy so that we may with burning

23. See R. Keifer, *Blessed and Broken: An Exploration of the Contemporary Experience of God in Eucharistic Celebration (Message of the Sacraments, 3)* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1982) 94-115.

hearts sit down to table, ready to recognize the Lord in the breaking of the bread and willing to be sent out on mission in the strength of that experience.

Conclusion

For the Christian disciple, witness and service do not stand alone; they are not their own wellspring. Witness and service spring from and seek constant renewal in contact with the living Lord--in the Stranger along the way, in his word, in the breaking of the bread. Prepared by catechesis for that moment of meeting the living Lord and blessed by that encounter, we are sent forth to witness and serve. "This is what we proclaim to you: what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes and our hands have touched--we speak of the word of life" (I Jn. 1:1).