

Liturgy: Communion with God

In the Gospel of Luke 24: 13-32, we read the story of Jesus, walking with three disciples on the road to Emmaus after His Resurrection. They do not recognize Him in His glorified state but Jesus asked them questions about what has just happened concerning His death and Resurrection to see where they are in their faith and commitment. He then catechizes the men by relating the Old Testament stories that reveal Who the Messiah will be and what He will accomplish through intense suffering. Upon arriving at their destination, they invite Him to stay with them for it was evening. While they are at table, Jesus breaks the bread and gives Himself to them in the Holy Eucharist. It is through this communion with Jesus that they recognize Him and believe, more profoundly, that He is the Savior and the Son of God. Christ wanted to teach them and us that it is through the liturgy that we participate in His Divine Life and it is through the liturgy that we find communion with Him, most especially in the Holy Eucharist.

In this Scripture reading, Jesus models for us the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. However, Jesus also models for us the preparation that is necessary before receiving Him in Holy Communion, His most intimate union with us here on earth. However, we must come prepared and continue to grow in faith each day through prayer and study or we can even be oblivious to what is happening in the liturgy.

Let us examine three points in seeking to better understand the liturgy: 1) What is included when we use the word liturgy? 2) What is liturgy? 3) What is the goal of authentic catechesis?

1) At the core of the Church's liturgy is the Holy Eucharist. The Holy Eucharist the sacred Body and Blood, soul and divinity of our Lord and King. We receive and are united with the living Christ. Jesus, Who desires to share His Divine Life with us, strengthens us to be faithful in living according to the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes. This is essential because we are not able to be faithful in following Christ through our own human strength. From Christ in the Eucharist comes the other six sacraments: Baptism, Confession, Confirmation, Holy Orders, Matrimony and Anointing of the Sick. Referring to the diagram of concentric circles, from the Eucharist and the sacraments come the Liturgy of the Hours, the Liturgical Year and sacramentals.

The Liturgy of the Hours, also called the divine office, is the praying of the Psalms, as well as readings from the Word of God, writings from the Fathers of the Church and sacred hymns. This celebration of the faithful (clergy, religious and lay people) is “so devised that the whole course of the day and night is made holy by the praise of God” (CCC #1174). The Liturgy of the Hours is meant to be an extension of the Holy Eucharist in recalling Jesus’ Incarnation and Paschal Mystery (His suffering, death, Resurrection from the dead and Ascension into Heaven). The Liturgical Year is the year long unfolding of the “whole mystery of Christ from His Incarnation and Nativity through His Ascension, to Pentecost and the expectation of the blessed hope of the coming of the Lord” (CCC #1194). The Church celebrates the Resurrection of the Lord once each week but also once every year, beginning with the 40 days of Lent, leading to His passion and death that conclude with Easter during the most solemn days of the year. In recalling and making present the mysteries of redemption, the Church opens up to the faithful the saving graces won by our Savior, drawing us closer to Him each year as we seek conversion through our own death to sin and selfishness and rising to new life in Christ. During this annual cycle of celebrating the mysteries of Christ, Holy Mother Church honors Mary, the Mother of God as the perfect disciple and exalts her as the most excellent fruit of Christ’s saving work. Martyrs and other saints are also remembered on their

anniversaries during the liturgical year as they are examples to us in persevering through their sufferings with the help of God's grace and through His merits have been glorified with Christ.

2) After noting what is included in using the word liturgy, we must ask: What is liturgy and what is the significance of liturgy? Liturgy is the official public prayer and worship of the Church. In the tradition of the Church, liturgy means the participation of the People of God in the 'work of God'. The work of Christ in the liturgy is the continuation of "the work our redemption in, with, and through His Church" (CCC #1069). Therefore, liturgy "is also an action of His Church" (CCC #1071). Two good questions to ask are: What is this 'work of God'? And what is the participation of the people in this work?

This 'work' is God drawing us to Himself through a call that He **initiates**. Our work is to freely **respond** to His call. **Jesus initiates** this work of salvation in the liturgy through which He calls us, saves us, blesses us, sanctifies us and glorifies us. Before He ascended into Heaven, Jesus gave us the priesthood. The priest is the mediator between Christ and us in this work of salvation as the priest stands *in persona Christi* (in the Person of Christ) to continue the work of Christ and His Church. The work of the people is to **respond** to God's blessing through our thankfulness, praise, worship, adoration, offering, interceding for others and glorifying Him. We can look to the Blessed Virgin Mary as the perfect model of this work of responding to the 'work of God'.

What is the result of the participation of the people in the 'work of God.'? When we actively and consciously respond to God's initiative in the liturgy, we experience **communion** with Him, above all in the Holy Eucharist. There is a **common union** in which the Holy Spirit forms the mystical Body of Christ, uniting the faithful with the Son of God. During the Holy Eucharist, after the consecration of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, Jesus offers Himself to the Father in thanksgiving when the priest prays: *Through Him, with Him and in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is Yours almighty Father, forever and ever. AMEN.* We join with Jesus in offering our personal sacrifices to the Father. Our Heavenly Father, in turn, welcomes us to the Sacred Banquet to receive the Body of Christ, to be in the most intimate communion with our Divine Lord.

We can see that 'the work of God' involves His initial call to bless and purify us and always draw us closer to Himself. Our work is the response that we freely give. Therefore the goal of liturgy is communion with Jesus.

In order to lead us to communion, the liturgy has required elements: proclamation of Scripture (CCC #1154); it is communal as the people of God gather together with the clergy (CCC #1140, 1142); God meets with His children and there is a dialogue, through gestures and words in which the faithful are called to respond (CCC #1153); the presence of signs, which effect what they signify and symbols (C #1127, 1145-1152). "In human life, signs and symbols occupy an important place. As a being at once body and spirit, [we] express and perceive spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols. As a social being, [we] need signs and symbols to communicate with others, through language, gestures, and actions. The same holds true for our relationship with God" (CCC #1146). The sacramental signs, such as the water at Baptism, effects what it signifies. In other words, the pouring of water on the forehead or complete immersion is not only a sign of cleansing from original sin but actually causes the cleansing of the person from original sin through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit carries on His work of sanctification (to make holy) through all the sacramental signs. The sacred chrism or holy oil that is used in the Sacrament of Confirmation is a sign of healing and anointing. Again, this anointing on the forehead effects what it signifies, in that Confirmation unites us more firmly to Christ and increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit in us, deepening baptismal graces in order to strengthen us as a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

(CCC #1303). Symbols, such as a blessed candle, represent the Light of Christ. Sacred art principally glorifies Christ and through gazing upon it our heart and mind is moved to praise and thank Him for His goodness and mercy. Gestures, such as the Sign of the Cross and Sign of Peace signify what Christ has done for us. However, our response of faith in our everyday life “has to accompany and give life to [these meaningful gestures]” (CCC #1153).

In recognizing the incredible significance of the liturgy, we turn to the link between liturgy and catechesis and ask: What is the goal of authentic catechesis? The preparation for liturgy should include catechesis, a daily prayer life, and pastoring. For this article, the focus will be on catechesis. The goal of authentic catechesis is to help us truly enter into the liturgy, to respond to God’s initiative to be in communion with Him in a heartfelt and committed manner. We are taught to understand the gestures, symbols, and sacramental signs in order to be more fully aware of Christ’s presence and to respond with active participation in the liturgy. The normal Christian life is to be liturgical, because we are created for this – to be in communion with God. How can anyone say that Mass is boring when they learn that “the Church celebrates in the liturgy above all the Paschal Mystery: [Jesus’ suffering, death, Resurrection from the dead and His Ascension into Heaven] by which He accomplished the work of our salvation” (CCC #1067). And the Paschal Mystery is actually made present in the Holy Eucharist. This truth alone involves catechesis for a lifetime!

3) The title of the article is “Liturgy: Communion with God.” In all teaching situations, we should be leading people to a greater ability to understand and respond to God’s initiative in the liturgy. In the RCIA process, the goal is to prepare adults to receive Jesus in Holy Communion and the other Sacraments of Initiation at the Easter Vigil. Second grade children are prepared to receive Jesus’ forgiveness in the Sacrament of Penance and Jesus’ Body and Blood in First Holy Communion. Our young people are prepared to receive the Holy Spirit in Confirmation as He strengthens them to be disciples of Jesus Christ. All other teaching situations should prepare us to be united with Jesus in the Holy Eucharist at Sunday Mass. Therefore, everything that is taught and prayed should form and inform the students (and our own) liturgical practice. Some practical suggestions include: begin the teaching session with the Scripture that is the driving force of the lesson and allow the students to respond to this Scripture with a Psalm response; teach using Sacred Art; close sessions with a simplified Liturgy of the Hours (which can be downloaded from www.liturgyofthehours.com); teach about and use sacramentals; plan the schedule of what will be taught according to the liturgical year; use the five step teaching process that allows time to apply the truth to the students’ lives as well as closing the session with a related prayer.

In closing, let us pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit to understand better the gift of the liturgy. As we enter more fully into the sacred mysteries, above all in the Holy Eucharist, we will be drawn into deeper communion with Jesus Christ, Who is our Life. The key is that liturgical people are made not born. We have to always be leading people and ourselves to deeper communion with Jesus Christ.