

How is the Liturgy Celebrated?

“Smells and bells!” That’s one way I have heard the Catholic liturgy described in the past. In the Catholic liturgy there are all sorts of signs and symbols used: bread and wine; incense and bells; oil and candles; singing and silence; standing, sitting, kneeling, walking, bowing, genuflecting; and many others. The use of all these symbols may seem strange or unnecessary to some, even to Catholics themselves. Hence the liturgy may seem to be mere “smells and bells.”

When the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* asks the question “who celebrates the liturgy,” it identifies two different groups in its response: “those who even now celebrate it without signs” in the heavenly liturgy (n. 1136), and those who are “celebrants of the sacramental liturgy” (n. 1140). The distinction is thus between those who see God “face to face” and *do not* need the use of sacraments and those who do not see God “face to face” and *do* need the use of sacraments. Sacraments, as many may recall, are outward signs, instituted by Christ, to give grace. That is, a sacrament is a sign or symbol that is perceptible to the senses that causes the unseen Christ and his grace to become present (see *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [CSL]*, nn. 7, 33). In the sacrament of baptism, for example, the outward pouring of water over the head of the unbaptized with the accompanying words of the minister actually causes the unbaptized person to die to sin and rise to new life by the grace of Christ. To use a different set of symbols—milk instead of water, let’s say—is to signify another reality, something besides dying to sin and rising to new life. In this life, then, we need sacraments—and a sacramental liturgy—for they are the surest way for us to encounter Jesus Christ.

The seven sacraments allow us to participate in the saving work of Christ, a work carried out primarily by his Paschal Mystery, and from which “all sacraments and sacramentals draw their power” (*CSL*, n. 61). The sacraments are always performed in the context of a liturgical celebration that is itself sacramental. That is, the liturgical celebration as a whole uses signs and symbols to present the “supernatural world” (see *CSL*, n. 122) and the heavenly worship in which the earthly liturgy takes part.

At the Easter Vigil, for example, we light and bless a fire at the celebration’s beginning to symbolize Christ our light, the new flame of hope, who dispels the darkness of our minds and hearts. Now, imagine how a larger fire, lit in the darkness, is a better symbol of these realities than is a small flame burning while the sun still shines. Like the symbol of the Easter fire, the liturgy’s other outward symbols serve to indicate some inward meaning. Just as we would stand when addressed by an important person, so we stand at the proclamation of the gospel because we believe that it is Christ himself who is addressing us. Because we believe that the reception of the Holy Eucharist unites all members of the Church into Christ’s one Mystical Body, each member is asked to receive communion in roughly the same way, that is, while standing and after making a bow of the head. In this way, the unseen reality of the Church’s unity is outwardly expressed by symbolic gestures.

Signs and symbols, and particularly sacraments, are the instruments we use in the celebrations of our earthly liturgies. To remove or diminish the liturgy’s signs is to remove or diminish the reality they make present, namely, the saving work of Jesus Christ. It is also important that we are attentive to the liturgical signs and symbols and try to understand their meanings, for the greater we understand these symbols and what they are pointing to are we better able to participate in the Mass (*CSL*, n. 21). The liturgy is our participation in the saving work of Christ, and the way in which we participate in the liturgy is by signs, symbols, and sacraments.

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