

With Reverence and Love...

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‘With Reverence and Love ...’

Eamonn Conway

‘Father, may we celebrate the Eucharist with reverence and love ...’. This was the Prayer over the Gifts at Mass last Sunday. As I heard it I was reminded of the Editor’s request that I would make a few critical comments on liturgy. I know there are some near-perfect parishes; that it is difficult to get everything right; that it has all been said before; that good help is hard to find nowadays (it isn’t!); that people in glasshouses shouldn’t throw stones. But here goes.

THE MUSIC

There really is no excuse for not having singing at every Mass, even at 7.00 o’clock in the morning. Anything, if even only the responses, indeed especially the responses. Where you have a cantor, let him or her train and teach and cajole the congregation. If you have the right cantor, it works. And let cantors get on with the job. Don’t make them do everything else as well, like read and give out communion. There are some very beautiful new hymns which can be easily learned. But ‘The Lord is my shepherd’, ‘All people that on earth do dwell’ or ‘Praise to the holiest’ are classics and people, young and old, love not only to hear them but to join in. Speaking of which, the hymn should not be seen as merely something with which to distract the congregation while the priest gets from sacristy to altar and which, when he arrives, must be suddenly stopped. If there are three verses to be sung, sing them. The words are, after all, a prayer, twice as valuable as any other if you believe St Augustine. If it has to be taped music, then for God’s sake a decent recording and a properly wired up cassette or CD player, and not one that is likely to click off when you least want it to.

THE MICROPHONES

Like it or not most priests and many churches are not much to

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look at. Sadly, worship is very much aurally dependent. Technology can overcome most obstacles and no expenses should be spared in making sure that all, including the hard of hearing, are enabled to hear the word of God loudly and clearly, wherever they are sitting, even – or perhaps especially – behind a pillar. Technology, however, is powerless in the face of the laziness, lack of interest and carelessness of presiders and readers. Enough said.

Speaking of technology, I know for some years now of one rural parish which supplies radio sets to housebound parishioners so that they can participate from home in whatever goes on in the church. I am not sure how widespread this service is but apparently where it happens it helps build community and ensures that the sick and elderly are not forgotten.

Without going into it in detail it is worth remarking that good lighting can transform even a dull and ordinary church and create an atmosphere of warmth and festivity.

THE READINGS

Can you remember last Sunday’s readings? Could you remember them even five minutes after Mass? But I bet you remember at least some of what you were reading last Sunday’s *The Sunday Independent*. Do we really need two readings? In some countries they read only one, and then more deliberately and prayerfully with an introduction which provides the context and, where appropriate, links it with the readings of the previous week. A similar introduction to the Gospel does not do any harm either. Aside from the liturgy, what about inviting some parishioners to meet each week to meditate on the Sunday readings and to tease out their message for your community? Surely this kind of a meeting would be far more important than many others which take up the time of parish ministers.

THE HOMILY

Preaching is not every priest’s particular gift. Perhaps what is most important is to become confident and competent in one’s own way of embodying God’s Word, on and off the altar. That is why other people’s notes, jokes and funny stories seldom work. Sometimes a little simple but solid exegesis, one or two interesting facts about the scriptures and what they might be saying to your community today, have the most impact. Humour and a smile, one’s own humanity coming through, all help the communication. We do not preach about ourselves, but we do proclaim an incarnate world. Above all, look at the people you are talking to. This is the very time to do it. Ask yourself: Have I really some Good News for these people this morning? And even if it is your

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third homily this weekend it is nonetheless a fresh enfleshing of God's living Word, so be alive in it, be present to people's concerns and hungers. At any time it is a great privilege to be able to address a large gathering of people, to take up their time, to demand their attention. It is a greater privilege still to be able to do so in the name of God's Word and to have the opportunity to say something which might help them to see God, and themselves before God, in a fresh and exciting way.

So there are children crying and restless. Well it doesn't have to be that way. Nor is the crying chapel, even to which Mass is relayed on camera, any real solution. Why not a liturgy designed for young people happening in an adjacent hall or room at the same time as the Mass and led by specially trained lay people? I know it is important to preserve the ideal of one community, but this could be done by welcoming the children at the start of the Mass, letting them celebrate at least their own liturgy of the Word and then inviting them to return, perhaps just in time for the final blessing. At that point they could be asked by the priest (armed with a good cordless microphone) how and what they had celebrated. I have seen this work very well. Doubtless there are other, better ideas. The point is: we need to do something. Otherwise, boredom will continue to be bred into young people from an early age. The usual Sunday homily, understandably, is very rarely aimed at young people or addressed in language and images which they can hear. They need, even deserve, at least an occasional Sunday liturgy of their own. Or is it that we are worried about them missing Sunday Mass? That is what will happen later unless we help them to pray now.

THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

There are approved prayers other than the four in the missal but people don't really seem to believe it. Even God likes a little variety. And when Mass is concelebrated, does the prayer really have to be divided out? One presider reading on behalf of all the people seems to make the most sense. If a poem was being read out loud we would rarely consider dividing out the verses. And if the reason we are doing it is so that the other 'fathers' will 'feel involved', then we should be ashamed of ourselves. Generally speaking, concelebrants are only a distraction. They make the sanctuary look untidy and the 'seen but not heard' rule should apply.

COMMUNION

Why does it always take so long for the eucharistic ministers to receive? And why doesn't the organist begin the second the prayer 'Lord, I am not worthy' is over. That is the start of communion,

not when the priest and the ministers have first received. By the way, a responsorial psalm or a hymn with a short refrain is ideal for communion, something people can easily sing on the move. Regarding hosts, people *do* notice when they are damp and mouldy. And I still remember the comment (made, I believe, in *The Furrow*) that First Communion children have two miracles to believe in, the most challenging being that this limp white two-pence is really a piece of bread. And why do we not distribute under both kinds? There are only practical arguments against and they are *not* convincing. Today more than ever in liturgy we need to appeal to all the senses. Wine, sprinkling with water, incense, flowers, good music, it can be done. By the way, at communion time there are now usually two processions, one up for communion, the other out the back door and away to be first out of the car park or into the shop for the papers. What can be done about this?

I mentioned above about looking at people when preaching. Similarly, when reading a prayer why not simply do that, read it? And when praying to God on behalf of the people, look at the book, the altar or just look reverently but don't give the impression that you are talking to them because you are not. You are speaking *with* them to God.

These may all seem like small points, and they are, some of them even trivial. But as a whole it is about being as professional as we can be in leading people in prayer. About the best way to become attentive to the finer points (which people notice even though they may not say it) is to understand the principles involved. It is really inexcusable if people (ordained and non-ordained) can become qualified in pastoral ministry and leadership without a fundamental grasp of the norms for liturgical worship. There really isn't much that has to be learned: a few documents, and the basic theological concepts underpinning them. Then people might realize why, for example, it is not just to be mean or awkward that we should stand for the Eucharistic Prayer or that an ordained minister should usually proclaim the Gospel. Many people today, even ministers, have a poor sense of ritual, gesture and symbolic action. They need to be helped to appreciate these. In particular they need to be helped to appreciate the richness of the rituals, gestures and symbols which have been fundamental to Christian worship for centuries. Even when people consider these outdated and in need of replacement, let their rejection of them be based on sound liturgical principles and not on mere emotivist expressions of preference.

We live in a world in which the imagination has been hijacked and is now shaped by multimedia with which the Church simply

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cannot compete. Yet, in Ireland, some would say despite our best efforts, people still come to church on Sunday morning in extraordinarily large numbers. For how long more remains to be seen. The writing is on the wall. Given the cultural climate, full churches each Sunday are a profound statement of faith. They are also a real statement of hunger and thirst. A few small improvements, most of which would cost only a thought or two, could make a big difference. We don't have to compete. People know in their hearts that Christianity can lift burdens and nourish dreams while 'Coronation Street' and the Spice girls at best merely provide a distraction. They do not come on a Sunday morning to be entertained. They get enough of that. But they do want to be able to hear God's incarnate word. This means not only good acoustics but also a gracious, spacious, uncluttered, prayerful atmosphere, a sense of reverence and peace. Ministers (Mass-servers included) dashing here and there have everyone wondering (a) where the fire is; (b) who forgot the notices or the missal. A lack of a sense of peace and unhurriedness externally can signal a similar lack in the inner disposition of the ministers.

And now to the big question: must it all really be over in thirty minutes? Again there are many excuses (e.g. regulating the traffic) but few arguments. Catholics who come to worship here from overseas are appalled. Fewer Masses done well: is it not at least worth a try? But if we are still not convinced, why not decide that one of the weekly Masses will be celebrated with 'the works', music, decent homily, perhaps even a dance or mime, plenty of room for quality, creativity and lively community prayer. Those who want simply 'to get Mass' can come at a different time. Try this and see if numbers keep up. I have a hunch that people respond to leisurely liturgies which are properly prepared and prayerfully celebrated. Why many want the 'quickie' is because there is very little to hold their attention, to stimulate their minds and hearts in worship, so they settle for 'fulfilling their Sunday obligation'. Even the language says it all.

I know that not every liturgy can or should be 'a high'. But every liturgy should allow God's glory, literally, God's reputation or standing among the people, shine through. Every liturgy should remind us of our dignity before God, where necessary breaking through layers of boredom, loneliness, failure and disappointment, drying our tears, warming and exciting us, confronting us again with the truth about the Risen One whose persistent love enfolds us and accompanies every step we take. At the very least we should come away from a liturgy with a sense that we took part, and that we're glad we did. These are important years in the Irish Church. In France some Sunday liturgies can now be held in

sacristies. The finest of Gothic cathedrals are already like the trees in Shakespeare’s poem, ‘bare ruin’d choirs where late the sweet birds sang’.

One could go on. There is a need for variety in community liturgies – reconciliation services, Morning and Evening prayer etc. And improving the quality of liturgical celebration will not be enough. In fact it needs to go hand in hand with systematic young adult and adult catechesis, the exploration of new models of community and the development of different forms of pastoral leadership. But there is much about the celebration of parish liturgy which could be put right fairly easily and without much fuss. ‘Lord, that we might celebrate each Eucharist with reverence and love.’

The bachelor remembers. The shaggy bachelor looks at the priest and mutters: ‘This house of mine is ree-raw but it suits me fine. Latterly people are looking at me as if I had a stare in my eyes. Times, too, my mind is a galloping horse.

‘When I was young, if you put your nose to a dance-hall you’d be blackened with curses. We were told that women were worse than dynamite. ‘Be said by the priest,’ my mother said: ‘Keep away from the hall.’ Even if they had allowed the short-hours dances, which are so sensible! I did what my mother told me; here I am now looking up the chimney and asking God what was the message He gave me to deliver. Times have changed. Now the highest in the land are making speeches at the opening of the parochial halls. I don’t understand it at all.

‘All I wanted was for someone to stand up in God’s House and tell me of the beauty that can lawfully be between man and woman. I was told all the things a man should not do; but few of the things he should do. Where did I get the notion that marriage was a badge of shame? A pity that what the American priest wrote in the paper didn’t reach me when I was younger. I see a one-ager of mine who went up to the hall in spite of the priest. He met a comrade there, too – a loyal girl. They had a son ordained last June. When I knelt for the lad’s blessing, I had the strangest feeling in the world. I’m not an example of vice, but tell me this, am I an example of virtue?’

—BRYAN MACMAHON, ‘The Priest in the Parish’ (*The Furrow*, December 1958, p. 801).