

The Church Prepares for Worship

When we gather as church to celebrate the Eucharist on the Lord's Day, we are preparing to perform the most dangerous act we could imagine: We are preparing to take God seriously. In our Sunday liturgy, at the profession of faith (creed), we name what we claim to be the truth of existence: The whole cosmos is a creation—a planned and patterned form of being that is wholly dependent on the Creator—which not only has a history but also a future under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Human beings, we affirm, by divine grace and mercy through Christ our Lord, have a key role to play in the creation.

Hearing and embracing the proclaimed Word of God, we discern the shape of our role as it unfolded in Jewish history and especially in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Knowing that his life led to rejection, insult, and the cross as well as to faith, love, and the resurrection, we sing our *Amen* to the Eucharistic Prayer, asking the Father to send the Spirit to make us “one body, one spirit in Christ” (Eucharistic Prayer III)—asking the Father, in other words, to use us, in Christ, to reveal and enact the divine plan of salvation.

Even when we gather as church but are unable to celebrate the Eucharist—when we gather on the Lord's Day, for example, without an ordained presider—we profess the same risk-laden faith. And when we celebrate the sacraments, we affirm that God's grace and the divine plan embrace human life from beginning to end, even when that life is in need of reform or healing, and that God guides the whole church, the “*ecclesiola*” (the “little church”) of the family, and individuals as we each work out our place in the church and in God's plan.

No wonder such a serious and dangerous act as this requires careful preparation. It requires all of us, first, to embrace the Church's sacramental sense—the conviction that human deeds and created things, used properly, can reveal God and the divine plan. It also requires that we be as familiar as we can with the Word that is proclaimed in the midst of the community, for in it Christ “is present . . . , since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 7). That proclaimed Word, received in faith, reveals our true identity—“we are God's children now”—and transforms us into what we will become—even if “what we shall be has not yet been disclosed” (1 John 3:2). Finally, it requires that we be familiar with the structure of the liturgy—with the way we gather, the shape of our common praying, and the attitude we should have toward each other gathered in prayer: We are the Body of Christ and “God's temple, where the Spirit of God dwells” (1 Corinthians 3:16).

We can develop familiarity with the Word and with the shape of our liturgy through praying: The Church's daily



prayer is the liturgy of the hours, and there are groups in many places who meet to pray morning or evening prayer. There are even more people who use some form of the hours in private prayer. We prepare for Sunday Eucharist through weekly Bible study, online learning, and prayer that incorporates the forms of the liturgy—psalms, litanies, acclamations, collects—used at parish meetings and in religious education sessions. We prepare for communal worship through devotional prayer, as well, for such prayer puts us in touch with the seasons (the Stations of the Cross, for example, or *las posadas*), with the saints who have gone before us (prayer to the Divine Mercy, wearing the scapular), and with God's work throughout history and across the globe (pilgrimages).

Those who minister to the assembly at worship must make additional preparations for their leadership roles. Those who preach and preside, for instance, must prepare a homily that is “a living commentary on the Word . . . for the nurturing of the Christian life” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 29, 65). Ordained celebrants must be familiar with the texts and actions to be used in the liturgy, so that they may carry out their role competently and guarantee that all the ministers “are completely sure before the celebration” about what is to be done, sung, and said for the “common spiritual good of the faithful” (*General Instruction*, 352).

Music ministers have preparations to make that require rehearsal, prayer together, understanding of the texts to be sung, development of appropriate musical skills, and a firm grasp of the way music functions at various places in the liturgy. Lectors have similar preparations to make before they stand to proclaim the Word. And all other ministers must prepare to bring the best they can to our shared worship, for the liturgy—especially Sunday Mass—is “the center of the whole Christian life for the Church both universal and local, as well as for each of the faithful individually. In it is found the high point both of the action by which God sanctifies the world in Christ and of the worship that the human race offers to the Father, adoring him through Christ, the Son of God, in the Holy Spirit” (*General Instruction*, 16).