

Ritual and Community: What I've Learned in the Parishes

By Bishop Kenneth E. Untener

Most Rev. Kenneth E. Untener is bishop of the Diocese of Saginaw, MI. This article is based on his presentation at the 1998 Region IV Convention in Helena, MT.

I'm going to talk about ritual and community, but I want to begin with some comments about my understanding of ritual. I look upon ritual as something that is predictable, repetitive, reverent, personal, communal, evocative of the widest and deepest feelings, and always fresh. A ritual that expresses all of that is, of course, something that is very difficult to create but, thankfully, instead of having to create the appropriate words and gestures that make up such a ritual, we are called to focus on how to understand and take full advantage of the ritual that has been provided for us. We have been given, by those who have gone before us, an extraordinarily good, expressive ritual that is potential dynamite, especially the Eucharist, but that evaluation is also true, I believe, of the other rites of the church as well.

Back in 1981, when many of us were trying to create "neat" Masses, Mark Searle wrote: "In our culture there is a distrust of formalities, as if formalities were necessarily mere formalism. The virtues commonly applauded, perhaps because so uncommonly practiced, are honesty, sincerity, and openness. Small wonder, then, that a liturgy of fixed forms should appear to many as a sure recipe for boredom. The cure is predictable: Jazz it up. Thus we are subjected to the curiosities of spontaneous prayer and creative liturgies, bombarded with aphorisms, folksy improvisations, and mawkish symbols which are supposed to be all the more sincere and meaningful if they have never been seen or heard before."

What I have to say this morning is about the ritual that we have, without any "jazzing up." The community responds to this ritual when they have a part in it, when they understand its meaning, and when it's done well. One of the finest examples that occurs to me of a ritual that creates liturgical prayer in its fullest sense, that is well understood and well done, is the veneration of the cross on Good Friday--if, of course, you are using a freestanding cross that people can approach and venerate, instead of using a hand-held cross that is passed along to be venerated with a quick kiss as people kneel at the communion rail. People settle in during the veneration when it is well done, with a sense that there is something special about all of us being here together, and something special about watching the people as they come forward to venerate the cross--the young people, and the kids, and the older people, coming forward to touch the cross or to kiss it or to stand and look at it. There is silence; it is simple ritual; everyone knows what it means, and people seem to have a sense that it means more because it something that we are doing together. It is always fresh, even though we celebrate Good Friday every year. That is an example of one part of the good ritual that we have been invited to celebrate in our time.

We have a wonderful ritual today, but it does have three problems. The part of the assembly that we call the "congregation" gets to do very little of that ritual; much of the ritual that is done is not understood by many members of the assembly; and much of the ritual that is done is not done very well. Apart from these three problems, of course, it is all wonderful.

On what do I base the claim that these three problems exist? I base it primarily on three sets of experiences. The first set comes from my work as a bishop of Saginaw, which takes me to three or four parishes each week to celebrate the liturgy. The second basis for my claim results from a program I began about four years ago, in which I ask five priests each month to videotape a live weekend liturgy and send the video to me. I videotape a live liturgy that I do, and copies of each of the tapes are sent to all six of the participants. After each of us has reviewed all the tapes, we meet for two hours to talk about what we have seen, and we try to help each other do it better--not only the act of presiding, of course, but we also try to find ways to improve the music, the use of the liturgical space, and so on. We have wonderful conversations about all of this, then we all go home and do it again, the same six people, making a new video, sharing copies of all six videos, meeting once more to talk

about it. In these past four years I have watched a lot of videos! And I have watched myself presiding and preaching at liturgy a lot!

The third basis for my claim comes from an occasional invitation that I receive to preside at all the Masses on one weekend in a parish in order to do a "teaching" Mass. This is an exception to the normal ritual, of course, but I explain to the people before Mass begins that I am going to stop before each of the five major parts of the Mass (gathering, word, Eucharist, communion, dismissal) to explain what we are going to do and why we are going to do it, to make it clearer and more understandable. (I also explain that this Mass will take about twenty minutes longer than usual.) This teaching is not something hard to do, for anyone who knows what the liturgy is and how it is structured but, each time I do it, a few people come up after Mass to say, "I never knew that. Why don't they tell us these things?"

On the basis of these three sets of experiences I have reached the conclusion mentioned above, that our excellent ritual has three problems. I have also concluded that the three problems are not anyone's "fault." They are the result of the massive shift that we have recently made from the Tridentine Mass to the Mass of Paul VI. It takes a long time to discern such basic problems after such a change, and it takes a while longer to find effective ways to respond to those problems.

The Congregation Has Little to Do

As I mentioned, many members of our congregations don't understand what we are doing, and in many places we don't do ritual very well. (In fact, usually we just tend to "do" it rather than to "pray" it.) One of the chief reasons, I think, for the lack of interest shown by many members of our assemblies in learning about the ritual and in doing it better has to be the lack of direct involvement they have in the basic elements that make up our ritual. There are at least four major ritual languages "spoken" at Mass: silence, movement and gesture, the spoken word, and the musical word. How much of each of those languages do the members of the congregation get to "speak" in an hour-long Mass?

When my mother died, we had a luncheon right after the funeral, before the burial, so when we got to the cemetery, only the members of our large family were present. As we were standing at the grave, I invited everyone to take a few moments of silence to think and to pray however we wanted to pray. We were never closer as a family than we were in those brief moments of shared silence. There is very little silence at Mass, though shared silence is one of the most communal experiences there can be, and silence is a wonderfully unifying language. After a reading, or after communion, or after the invitation to pray, when the ritual books call for shared silence, there is very little of such sharing. In fact, reviewing the videos with a stopwatch, I have counted at most sixty seconds of such silence at a Mass.

There are many movements and many gestures during the course of a Mass, but the congregation gets to move very little. As I've mentioned before, (1) we seem to think that, because more people are involved in doing the liturgy, "the people" have more to do. But that does not follow; it is an illusion. As one member of a congregation once told me, "All we get to do is stand, sit, say 'Amen,' and go to the bathroom." The two biggest gestures in which all (or most) of the members of the assembly are involved at Mass come close together--the exchange of the peace, and processing to communion. By my calculations, from joining in the Our Father through the exchange of the peace and processing to communion, the members of the congregation normally get to join in about three-and-a-half minutes of movement.

As concerns the congregation's direct involvement in the spoken word (which I have timed with a stopwatch): If there is a creed, the congregation gets to speak for a total of ninety seconds. If there is no creed, fifty-eight seconds. That includes every "Amen," every "Lord, have mercy," every spoken word assigned to the congregation.

Congregational participation in the sung word varies quite a bit from parish to parish and from liturgy to liturgy. But, generally, if there is a sung Gloria, most members of the assembly get to sing for eight to nine minutes. By far, then, the biggest ritual entrée that most of the assembly has to what is going on is the music. This fact is of significant importance to pastoral musicians.

In sum, then, the total amount of time for direct participation by the congregation--actually "doing" any kind of ritual "language"--in a whole hour- long Mass is about thirteen or fourteen minutes.

The Gathering Rite Begins Well, But . . .

We have a very good ritual, though there are some adjustments that ought to be made, but we have to find ways of connecting the ritual to the community, because most members of the community don't have much of a chance to participate directly in the languages that make up the ritual. A quick review of the five major parts of the Mass will show that lack of community involvement in the ritual, but it may also point us in some useful directions for developing ways of increasing ritual involvement. I will spend more time on the gathering rite than on other parts of the Order of Mass apart from the liturgy of the Eucharist, not because it is more important than, say, the liturgy of the word, but because it comes first and will illustrate best many of the points that I want to make.

The gathering rite at Mass ranks second (behind the communion rite) in opportunities for congregational involvement in the four ritual languages, because there is a lot of ritual involvement in getting ready to come to church, parking, entering the building, greeting other people, finding a place to sit, talking to people in neighboring seats--all those actions, unfortunately, that are not normally considered part of the gathering rite. If, after all of this has taken place, followed by the entrance procession and opening hymn, any presider says, "Let us begin in the name of the Father . . .," there is a clear lack of understanding about what has been going on for the past twenty minutes!

Still, once the entrance procession starts, the involvement of members of the congregation in the ritual languages goes into decline. Aside from making the sign of the cross, there is no movement by the people during the entire gathering rite as laid out in the Order of Mass: They stand. They do get to speak and sing and enter into communal silence, if the presider offers an opportunity for silent prayer after the invitation to "call to mind our sins" and to pray the opening prayer.

How well do the assembly members understand the ritual that constitutes the gathering rite? I am not sure that they even notice or, if they do notice, take cognizance of the cross that leads the procession, which is there to remind us that we walk the "way" of the cross: "Whoever wishes to follow me must . . . take up the cross" (Mark 8:34). I am not sure how much they understand about being led by the word of God, as the lector carries the lectionary held aloft, or the deacon carries the Book of the Gospels. (I'm equally not sure how many people would notice, at the end of Mass, if we stopped carrying the book out, on the theory that we become the word of God at Mass and carry it within us.) People in general, in my opinion, do not comprehend the meaning of the gathering (opening) prayer or of the silence that should precede it.

How well are our gathering rituals done? The ways in which people are greeted or welcomed as they gather will vary from parish to parish. Ushers or other greeters are often assigned this task, because in many parishes the other ministers of the celebration are still back in the sacristy, which sometimes seems like Omaha Beach on D-Day, as people slug it out at the last minute, trying to get the final details of the upcoming liturgy ironed out. Once the procession starts, I can see, on many of the videos that I watch, that no one in the procession is singing. The arrival and bow at the altar are usually something less than full ritual gestures. The half-bow that is offered but not completed before we are already moving away from the altar is an indication of how stingy we are with our gestures.

Word: A Low Point in Participation

The liturgy of the word usually takes about twenty to thirty minutes, during which time the congregation gets to do hardly anything. They sit from the first reading; they stand for the Alleluia and the Gospel; they sit for the homily; they stand for the creed and the general intercessions. There is very little for them to do in terms of speaking and singing: the responses to the readings, the refrain of the responsorial psalm, the text of the creed, the response to the petitions of the general intercessions. There are few opportunities for silence, usually, though it is called for after each of the readings and after the homily.(2) This part of the Mass is one of the two "mountain peaks" among the five sections of the Order of Mass. Yet during this high point, there is little for the congregation to do in the way of gesture, silence, song, or speech. In my rating system of congregational involvement and understanding, it comes in fourth.

How well do they understand what is being done? How well they understand the homily, of course, will vary from parish to parish and preacher to preacher. They do understand the creed; these are traditional words that they have grown up with.(3) But when it comes to understanding the first two readings, people need help. We are not people of the Hebrew Bible, so these texts need some brief introduction, as do the texts of the New Testament apart from the gospels.(4) It will take generations before these texts become part of our blood and bones, so when they come at us "out of the blue," as they do for many people today, the texts are simply not understandable. As for the responsorial psalm, if you did a survey, I believe that most people would not know that these texts are Scripture.(5) They would probably say that it's the next hymn we're supposed to sing. Nor do they understand that they're supposed to sit back and "savor" these beautiful texts of joy and sorrow and hope and petition. How well are the rituals done in the liturgy of the word?

How well the readings themselves are proclaimed depends on the place and the reader. When asked about acting, the late Frank Sinatra once commented: "There's no trick to acting. All you have to do is know the lines like you know your own name." Similarly, there's no trick to being a good lector; all you have to do is know those texts like you know your name. Of course, to do that, you'll have to spend a few hours in preparation--not learning where to pause, but learning what the text means. Then, when you get up, all you have to do is proclaim the meaning that the text expresses, saying it however you would say that meaning. The liturgy of the word is not an occasion for great acting; it is an occasion for someone to speak these words and their meaning from the heart.

In my experience, fifty percent of the time I cannot understand the verses of the responsorial psalm that the cantor sings, even though I have read the psalm beforehand. A cantor may sing well, and the sound system may be adequate, but, as with the ministry of lector, the ministry of cantor is not being performed well if the words of the psalm cannot be understood.

Eucharist: Not Much Good News

There is a lot to be said about congregational participation in and understanding of the liturgy of the Eucharist, as well as about how well the rituals are done. Most of what should be said, unfortunately, is not good news. In terms of congregational movement, for instance, the majority of the assembly gets to sit for the preparation of gifts from beginning to end, while four people bring the gifts forward and ushers take up the collection. This is not community ritual. During the Eucharistic prayer, they stand for the preface and kneel for the rest of the prayer, with no additional movements or changes of posture--no sign of the cross, no bow, no beating of the breast.(6) That is not ritual.

How much shared silence is there during this key part of the liturgy? From the beginning of the preparation of the gifts to the Amen of the Eucharistic prayer: usually, none. How much spoken prayer is there? Little for the congregation: the response to the invitation to pray at the prayer over the gifts, and the Amen at the end of that prayer; the responses of the preface dialogue (if they are not sung); the memorial acclamation and Amen at the end of the Eucharistic prayer, if these are not sung. How much singing is there? Precious little.

The congregation might sing at the preparation of the gifts (though I think that this is not a good idea); they usually sing the acclamations of the Eucharistic prayer (Holy, memorial acclamation, and Amen).

In other words, there is very little for the congregation to do during this whole stretch from the preparation of the gifts through the end of the Eucharistic prayer. They move very little; they have no assigned gestures; they have little to say or sing; there is little, if any, communal silence.

How well do they understand the ritual of this part of the Mass, whether it is done by others or done by them? For most people, the collection of money is probably thought of more as "paying their dues" than as "making an offering to the Lord," and the presentation of bread (usually prepared outside the community) and wine (poured from a bottle in the sacristy) by a "representative" group does not seem very involving. What else might be done? During Lent of 1998 in our diocese, we emphasized the notion of almsgiving. One way of focusing on this theme was to invite people to come forward at preparation time with specific gifts, for which they had been prepared the previous week: food one week; then dry goods for the poor that are not covered by food stamps; then a card on which they wrote a nice letter to any legislator in the country (or the world), asking them to be more careful of the poor; and so on. (Parishes also provided baskets in which they could place their money offering as they came forward.) For most people, this was a whole new experience of this part of the Mass. Suddenly there was this flow of people toward the altar and back again; there was a direct involvement in preparing something that is going to happen. People loved it; it was a chance to move; they felt part of what was going on. Perhaps they even felt that the bread and wine, placed on the altar, really symbolized the gift of themselves placed there to be transformed into Christ.

The preface is a mystery, so far as most people are concerned. It's not seen as part of the Eucharistic prayer, and the Holy seems to come from nowhere. People don't sense the truth that in the Eucharistic prayer we cross the threshold of history in order to participate in the great heavenly banquet that is taking place with the risen Lord and all the saints and all who have "died in Christ." We sing with the angels and saints. What they sense is that it takes a long time and a lot of words to "consecrate the hosts." The Amen at the end of the prayer, which should be a crescendo, seems detached from what has gone before; people don't know why they should sing with gusto at this point.

In Saginaw, we're currently operating with too few priests, and we're trying to plan for having one-third fewer priests in the coming years. One of the parameters for this planning is that parishes are not allowed to substitute a word-and-communion service for a currently scheduled Mass. (They can't say, "No priest for Saturday evening? Fine, we'll do word-and-communion.") Now, this limitation seems strange to many people, because they don't see the difference between Mass and this other service. Even though people tell me that when they go to a funeral for someone whose body has been given to science, they miss something, there is something incomplete in a funeral where the body is not present, when they talk about the difference between a Mass and a word-and-communion service, those same people can't identify anything that they would miss. They tell me specifically that they would not miss the Eucharistic prayer, because, they say, this prayer is the "priest's part," so what is there to miss? One person put this attitude perfectly: "At these services, we get the word of God, and we get the gift of God in communion. What else do we need?" In the minds of many people, because of the way this part of the ritual is done, the Mass seems to consist of a twofold movement: God moves toward us in the word, and then God moves toward us again in the Eucharist, culminating in communion. In fact, though, in the Eucharist we move toward God, coming forward with our gifts, our lives, putting ourselves on the altar in order to join the trajectory of Jesus, who lived and died giving himself to God with great trust. We connect with the living Jesus doing just this in the Eucharist, lifting himself toward the Father. This part of the Mass is where we get to do that, and then we celebrate all of that--God coming toward us in the word, our moving toward God "in Christ" with everything that is in us--we celebrate it all in the great banquet of communion. But people tell me that they've never heard this interpretation of the Eucharist.

Of the two "mountain peaks" of the Mass, this Eucharistic section is the higher peak, and this ritual marks the difference between a Mass and "going to communion." It is the reason for coming together: This we must do together. But people say they would not miss this key ritual, because they have not understood its importance. There are many things we can do . . . legally . . . to correct this problem, but it will take some work.

Finally, how well are the rituals done in this part of the Mass? Minimalism rules: Just a few people bring forward the gifts; the Eucharistic prayer seems to follow the same trajectory as the liturgy of the word (God talks to them in the word, and the priest talks to them--and to the bread and cup--in the Eucharistic prayer). It doesn't look or sound as if the priest is talking to God; if it is perceived as prayer of any kind, it is the "priest's prayer." In my rating system, this highest part of the Mass comes in dead last, lower than the gathering rite and the dismissal rite.

Communion Rite

Based on my three criteria for participation, the communion rite comes in first. This is when we have all that movement of the Lord's Prayer (if they join hands or raise their hands in prayer), the sign of peace, and the communion procession. There is a lot of congregational speaking and singing, and there is occasionally shared silence. The rite is cluttered and fragmented, but people generally understand what is taking place. They love the Our Father, and they know what it means. They may not know exactly what the sign of peace is, thinking of it more as a friendly greeting than as a mutual exchange of the peace of Christ, but most of them love it. They know what sacramental communion is about. They may not understand the prayer after communion very well; in fact, even some priests tend to think of it as part of the dismissal rite than as part of communion, though the text always speaks about what we just did. Often there is not enough shared silence, but we can work on that. The biggest thing that is lacking is reverence, not only on the part of the congregation who come forward to receive communion, but also on the part of those who handle and minister the consecrated elements. People don't seem to understand, when they hold the consecrated bread or drink from the cup, that they are holding and sharing the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the Triune God with a human being at the center, because they are sharing the full mystery of Jesus, died and risen. They don't understand that the Amen they speak is an acceptance of what Jesus accepted at Gethsemani and at Easter, an acceptance of the Lord into their lives right now, no matter what that might mean in fidelity to God's will. And we still have to figure out what to do with the congregation after the communion procession is over.

Dismissal Rite

Although this rite is very brief, it comes in third for congregational participation, behind the communion rite and the gathering rite. It's pretty obvious what's supposed to be happening, but I'm not sure that people have a sense that they are being "sent" by this rite; that awareness could certainly be enhanced.

In sum, then, we have a ritual that is wonderful, but we have to find ways to let the people do more. There are a hundred ways we can do that (legally), if we are willing to make the Mass something other than a Prussian close-order drill. There are ways to help people understand what is going on. They love the Mass, and they want to know about it, and they are grateful to find out. There are certainly ways to do the ritual better, and I am proud of all those who are working to find those ways.

Notes

1. See my article, "We Offer You, Father, This Life Giving Bread . . .," *Pastoral Music* 21:2 (December-January 1997) 25.
2. General Instruction of the Roman Missal #23.

3. This part of Mass, which many liturgists would like to make optional or remove altogether, is the longest spoken part of the Mass assigned to the assembly. People have told me, when I have dropped the creed from a celebration, "You may not think that we should do it, but your attitude is typical of celebrants. You want to think for us; you think that your experience of the Mass is our experience of the Mass."
4. I meet with a Scripture scholar and a journalist to prepare a set of brief introductions (no longer than thirty seconds) to the first two readings of the current cycle, not to say what the readings are about, but simply to provide a setting for the text. It takes the three of us about two hours to prepare introductions for four Sundays. These are sent to the parishes in the diocese for their optional use. Anyone interested in receiving a copy of the introductions for the rest of the Sundays in this year may contact Bishop Untener's office in the Diocese of Saginaw.
5. Perhaps, instead of calling it the "responsorial psalm," which makes it sound like some kind of medical instrument, we ought simply to call it "the sung Scripture."
6. In "liberal" parishes where the congregation stands for the whole Eucharistic prayer, there is not even this minimal change of posture from standing to kneeling for the majority of the assembly.