

Preparing the Way for the Roman Missal

Where the New Translation meets the New Evangelization™

What is 'liturgy'?

Imagine going to visit with friends. There, a card table is all prepared with chips already in place. You take a seat. Hands are dealt and it's time to play. But what if you have just a limited sense for the *nature* of the game? Oh, you may be able to go through the motions for a time, but in the end your participation won't be of very much benefit, and before very long you're probably going to go broke!

Well, make no mistake about it; the sacred liturgy is no game, but the same principle applies - unless we have a solid sense for the *nature of Holy Mass*, our participation is likely to be of limited benefit. The best we'll be able to do is simply go through the motions, and if we're not careful, we may just find ourselves hurtling toward *spiritual* bankruptcy!

So, what exactly is "liturgy"?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that "liturgy originally meant a 'public work' or a 'service in the name of/on behalf of the people.' In Christian tradition it means the participation of the People of God in 'the work of God.'" (CCC 1069)

Did you catch the distinction? It's critically important!

"Liturgy" *originally*; in other words, prior to Christ and before He founded His Church, was simply a public work of the people. That's all it could be! We, however, understand that it means the people's participation in the very work of God!

The difference is tremendous! So, is liturgy *our* work? No, *it is God's work*, and we, the Baptized, have the great privilege and indeed *the duty* to take part in it; in other words, to *participate* in it.

What is happening in the liturgy?

The Catechism continues saying, "Through the liturgy, Christ, our redeemer and high priest, continues the work of our Redemption in, with, and through his Church" (CCC 1069 cont.).

The work of Redemption

Now wait just a minute! How can we say that Christ accomplishes the work of our Redemption – *in the present tense* – at Holy Mass? Didn't the Lord by His passion, death and resurrection *already* accomplish the work of Redemption?

These are important questions, and if you're not exactly sure how to answer them, don't feel bad! This is a great *mystery* of our Catholic faith. In fact, this is one of the reasons Holy Mass is called a *celebration of the "sacred mysteries."*

"Mystery" in the theological sense doesn't mean unknowable; rather, it refers to a truth that is so great and so profound that we can only speak of it in terms of analogy, or through signs and symbols. (We'll return to "signs" in a moment as they are a very important part of the sacred liturgy.)

Even though it isn't possible to *fully* articulate the glory of Holy Mass as the locus of Redemption in the Church, St. Leonard of Port Maurice – Patron Saint of Parish Missions – offers this very beautiful reflection for our consideration:

The most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was instituted in order to apply in detail that universal ransom which Jesus paid for us on Calvary.

While the *bloody* Sacrifice of the Cross was the instrument of Redemption, the *unbloody* Sacrifice of the Mass is that which put us in possession of this work; the one threw open the treasury of the merits of Christ our Lord; the other affords the practical use of that treasury.

It may be said, with all truth, that in every Mass, our Redeemer returns mystically to die for us, without really dying again, at one and the same time really alive and as it were slain: As St. John records in the Apocalypse, "I saw a Lamb standing as it were slain" (Apocalypse 5:6).

Active Participation

In the decades following the Second Vatican Council, an increasing amount of emphasis has been placed upon promoting the “fully conscious and active participation of all the faithful in the sacred liturgy” (cf *Sacrosanctum Consilium* 14).

Many of us have to come to think of this “active participation” as things like saying our responses, singing songs, carrying up the gifts, acting as ushers or lectors, etc. While all of these activities and others like them are important, they do not *on their own* constitute “fully conscious and active participation” as Holy Mother Church has always understood it and encourages it.

So, what exactly is “active participation”?

Well, the first thing we should know is that the desire to promote a deeper, more meaningful form of participation in the Mass didn’t begin with Vatican II!

In the 1947 Encyclical, *Mediator Dei*, Pope Pius XII urged “more faithful participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice,” and he teaches us that *interior participation in the most important*.

Keeping in mind that our participation in the Mass is nothing less than participation in the Lord’s saving work; let us consider Pope Pius’ very passionate exhortation:

“Emphatically, therefore, the work of Redemption, which in itself is independent of our will, requires a serious interior effort on our part if we are to achieve eternal salvation.”

Think about just how much is at stake in the matter of “active participation” in the sacred liturgy - it is our very salvation!

It should be made clear that ‘active participation’ does not refer to mere external activity during the celebration. In fact, the active participation called for by the Council *must* be understood in more substantial terms, on the basis of a greater awareness of the *mystery* being celebrated and its relationship to daily life.

- *Sacramentum Caritatis* - Pope Benedict XVI - 2007

Developing the necessary ‘interior disposition’

The Holy Father went on to say in *Sacramentum Caritatis* that we can best grow in our “awareness of the mystery being celebrated” through what he calls “*mystagogical catechesis*.” This may be an intimidating phrase, but all it really means is the kind of teaching that illuminates for us (to the extent that this is possible for mere human beings) Holy Mass as *sacred mystery*; in other words, the kind of learning you’re doing right now!

The Council Fathers tell us that Holy Mass reflects the nature of the Church because in the liturgy, just as in the Church, “the human is directed and subordinated to the divine, the visible likewise to the invisible, action to contemplation...” (cf SC 2)

Question for you: Do human beings like to be subordinated to *anything*? No, of course not! It takes great humility and the assistance of God’s grace to subordinate oneself – *yes, even to the Divine action at Holy Mass*. And yet *this* is what allows for the participation that Christ wills for us!

The indispensable role of sacred signs

The Lord created us to be more than just spirit, but also *body, mind, intellect, will* and *senses*. As such, God knows very well that we also need tangible assistance in order to enter ever more deeply into the Divine Action made present at Holy Mass, and He provides this help to His people “through signs that are perceptible to the senses” (CCC 1070).

The sacred signs at Holy Mass are many - words, music, incense, gestures, vestments, vessels, etc.; i.e., *everything* that is perceptible to the senses, and their purpose is to elevate our hearts and minds beyond our present earthly condition into an experience of Divine union and Heaven itself!

The Council tells us that the “visible signs used by the liturgy to signify invisible divine things have been chosen by Christ or the Church,” and one of these signs involves the text of the liturgy itself.

Though change is never easy, we have *much* to look forward to in the new translation! As the Holy Father said, “Through these sacred texts and the actions that accompany them, Christ will be made present and active among His people.”

All glory, praise and honor to Almighty God!