

Sunday, July 1, 2007

### ***Reflections on the Church at Prayer***

This is the first in a series of reflections on the ritual activity of the church at prayer. The first of our considerations must be: Gathering!

The root word for Synagogue and Church are the same: Assembly. We are a gathering, a coming together of people in the name of the Lord. We come to join our sisters and brothers at worship that we might grow in our relationship with God and one another in the Body of Christ.

The very word assembly implies that one does not worship God in a vacuum, privately, or in adoration when an assembly takes place. The very nature and definition of "liturgy" is the public celebration of faith among the faithful gathered as one. Thus, the first encounter with the Lord in the church is the encounter with each other. The church has been described as the eighth sacrament, "The sacrament of the encounter with Christ".

Newly constructed or renovated buildings which house the Church, must be at least one-third gathering space – a suitable place to gather in hospitality. This space often will have a fireplace, sofas and chairs, piano, food service kitchen, and public address system. This space is the foyer to worship, and the first extension of worship from which we take leave. Gathering is a conscientious process of coming together, not to pray in isolation, but to form the Body of Christ.

It is proper that hospitality be afforded all that come to worship. Greeters dedicated to friendliness and graciousness should welcome all with a simple, "Hello, we look forward to praying with you today". Sometimes a greeter might say, "Is this your first time with us? Let me introduce you to someone who can make you comfortable here". Greeting and hospitality serve the assembly well. As one passes through the "Gathering Space" we approach the Baptismal Font – and rightly so; this is how we first entered the assembly.

While there is a time and place for private prayer and devotion, it does not belong to the rituals of the sacraments. The entire liturgy of Christianity is a shared experience, public and communal among the gathered assembly. How do we meet these standards?

Sunday, July 8, 2007

### ***Reflections on the Church at Prayer***

We sign ourselves with baptismal water when we enter church. By this sign we: 1) remember our baptism, 2) wash ourselves of distraction, and, 3) connect with all who enter by a common gesture of faith.

The "Font of Baptism" over the generations has become a minimal sign of the great event of "Christian Initiation". The ancient rituals of baptism call for a pool of water with three steps down into the water and three steps out of the water. Candidates for baptism would be lead into the waters by the deacon and symbolically "drowned unto death" and "raised up" out of the waters into the life of the risen Lord, the Christ.

Over time, the great ritual of baptism divided into three parts: 1) water, 2) reception of Eucharist, 3) sealing with the Spirit. Then, as baptism became a ritual for children rather than the adult ritual as originally intended, the symbols became reduced to "form and matter". Say the right words and with the right intention use the sign, and the sacrament is conferred. However, this minimal approach to sacraments and worship began to lose the meaning of the symbolism of the sacrament. Immersion in water as "dying" was lost to sprinkling or pouring of water as a "cleansing from sin". Putting on Christ after the water ritual was lost to bringing a baby to church for baptism in a baptismal garment. One can already guess how the Adult reception of Eucharist at the Easter Rites of Initiation has become a children's ritual of First Communion, and how Confirmation has become another rite of passage for teenagers.

Signing ourselves with water is so habitually done at the door of the church from a small cup posted at the door. Has this led to a disconnect between the door and Font? The Baptism Font and rite of immersion in the waters have been restored by the church universal. The Font is to be a pool with flowing water. The Font is to be a significant pool with access to all to sign themselves as a reminder of our communal life in the Body of Christ begun in the waters of Baptism. What does the Baptism Font at OLGH mean to us as we gather for liturgical prayer? Have we lost the symbolism of the Font when celebrate the "Rites of Initiation"?

Sunday, July 15, 2007

***Reflections on the Church at Worship***  
***“Music and Prayer”***

This is the third in a series of articles on the “how and why” of liturgical prayer. We have already considered the Gathering of the Assembly and the Sign of Water as we enter the assembly. Let us consider the role of Music and Song!

“Music is the servant of worship”, which inspires and transforms the faithful. Sung music is a twice-offered prayer of heart and voice. Music may be instrumental – to set a mood and environment, or sung. We cannot experience music without being drawn into its depth and power. Woodwinds, organ, guitar, brass, drums, strings, piano give expression to prayer and help shape our meditation and our response.

Lyrics of prayer in worship are declarations of faith, confessions of the heart, and witness to hope of glory, all in the praise of God. Music as the servant of prayer invites us to fuller participation of the sacred by raising up our awareness of who we are in the presence of the Creator, Redeemer, and Spirit God. Not all music is fit for worship, nor is every hymn or composition fitting for worship by people of faith. Music is the church’s response to the Spirit. The selection of music, its placement in the liturgy, the format used, and our role as assembly and musicians together brings balance and harmony to prayer.

The initial use of music at worship sets the tone for prayer with a thematic suggestion of what scripture will call to our attention. It is the song of the church in “the gathering rites” which unifies the assembly making us one. Those who do not sing the gathering song choose to limit their participation in the assembly and the effect that worship can have. The fuller the sung participation in the gathering rite, the fuller the active participation of the church at worship. This hymn draws us together into the Body of Christ. Cantors, choirs, instrumentalists all are there as ministers to assist the assembly in prayer. Musicians are committed to training, practice, and scheduling for the benefit of all. Let those who have the gift of music lead and serve the sung prayer of us all.

“If God gave you a beautiful voice, sing to inspire others”, and, “if God gave you a voice which mimics nails on a chalk board, then sing to let God enjoy what was given to you”!

Other uses of music will be considered as we look at various aspects of liturgical prayer.

Sunday, July 22, 2007

***Reflections on the Church at Worship***  
***“The Liturgy of the Word”***

Of all the changes realized following the liturgical renewal of the Council, no one ritual adaptation is greater than the restoration of the Scriptures in all the sacraments. Catholics had grown comfortable with ritual action known as “form and matter” – say the right words and use the correct ritual and the effect of the sacrament was realized. The Council of the universal church decreed that every liturgy and sacrament should follow upon the proclamation of the Word of God. We had fallen into a pattern of minimalism concerning our sacraments, i.e.: when we went to confession we used a formula and never was the scripture invoked, read, or proclaimed. This is now forbidden, and every “rite of reconciliation” can only be honestly a sacrament when it flows from the Word of God.

In the Liturgy of the Eucharist we use a two-tier schedule of scriptures: 1) Sundays: A three-year cycle of readings is used, 2) Weekdays: A two-year cycle is used. In this, the entire Scripture is proclaimed. This restoration of the Hebrew Scriptures (the first reading and psalm text) celebrates our history, heritage, and links us to the ministry of Jesus and the Church. The New Testament letter, formerly called the Epistle, connects us with the early church experience of struggle of faith. The Gospel is the encounter with the teachings of Jesus as recorded from various oral traditions and communities.

The readings of the Lord’s Day Liturgy, Sunday Mass, must be proclaimed, not simply read. These texts are to evoke a faith response and come from the pondering and reflection of the reader who has digested it and proclaims it with conviction, as the core of their belief. Yet, sadly, many simply read the Word of God as if they had never seen it before; let alone believe what they read.

The Psalm, sung by the congregation, is a scriptural song by which the faithful who have heard the text of the Hebrew Scriptures responds to what has been proclaimed. Yes, the congregation, the assembly, also proclaims the Word of God at every Liturgy.

Sunday, July 29, 2007

### *Reflections on the Church at Worship*

#### *"The Psalm and Gospel Acclamation"*

When we look closer at the Liturgy of the Word, as begun in last week's column, we find two special times in which the gathered assembly is asked to participate in proclaiming the Word of God – the Psalm and the Gospel Acclamation.

The Responsorial Psalm, sung after and in response to the first reading, is not a time for private meditation as we listen to the cantor sing, but rather a chance for us to actively respond aloud to God's Word. The psalms were written as songs; they are lyrical and poetic works meant for singing. These God-given words express the faith of God's people. . . of us. What better way is there than using the power of music to lift us to higher expressions of wonder and praise, repentance and sorrow, hope and trust, or joy and exultation?

The cantor leads the singing of the Psalm, but only in a manner to encourage all of us to participate. There is a psalm suggested in the lectionary for every liturgy; however, the psalm can be seasonal, or one musical setting can be used for several weeks. This is done to help us all participate fully in the sung proclamation of the psalms. If the music changes every week, it can be more difficult for all of us to sing it together. This practice can reduce the psalm to a musical exercise of memory, instead of allowing us to sing past the notes, where the music becomes one with the text and with us. We cannot effectively pray the psalm if we are just trying to sing the correct notes and rhythms. However, when the music of the psalm becomes familiar to us, then the beauty and meaning of the psalm text can be proclaimed from our hearts, minds, and souls.

The next part of the Liturgy of the Word at which we all share an active part is the Gospel Acclamation. This musical acclamation is actually a part of the Gospel proclamation. It is the gathered community saying, "We welcome the Good News of Jesus into our midst"!

We rise to our feet and sing this proclamation with joyful hearts, and we prepare to let the Gospel into our hearts and welcome Jesus to be more fully present among us. After the Gospel is proclaimed, we once again sing, "Alleluia", or "Praise to you Lord" as our response to hearing and accepting Jesus and His words in the Gospel.

Our full participation in the singing of the Psalm and the Gospel Acclamation within the Liturgy of the Word helps us to share our faith with others. We become one in our response to God and our call to share our lives as baptized believers on our journey of faith. Sing out with Joy!