

Pastoral

Celebrating the Eucharist The Year of the Eucharist 2005

The Year of the Eucharist is an appropriate time to look again at the great mystery of the Eucharist and to value again the meaning and beauty of the liturgy. Pope Paul VI, when he was Archbishop of Milan, once spoke to his priests about the danger that, gradually, the great truths of the faith – the death and incarnation of Christ, the Holy Trinity – can almost be taken for granted, can become a kind of routine.

The same danger is present in our celebration of the Eucharist. The words and the signs can become so familiar that we lose the sense of wonder and we fail to appreciate their deeper meaning. With that lack of appreciation can go a way of speaking the words and carrying out the signs which fails to convey their richness. There may be a risk of altering or blurring words and signs in a way that may seem more 'natural' but which obscures their full meaning.

The publication of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal brings an opportunity for priests and Liturgy Groups to look again at how the richness of the liturgy can be made more evident in our parishes.

The first step is to recognise that liturgical symbolism, expressed in signs and words, has a profound importance:

"The significance of symbolism can never be separated from the mystery of the Incarnation whereby the invisible God became visible man in Jesus Christ, and so signs and symbols in Christian worship belong to a completely new realm. This is expressed in one of the liturgical texts namely the Preface of Christmas in the words, which refers to Jesus Christ as follows: "In him we see our God made visible" and goes on to express the desire that we may be drawn by "our God made visible" "to the contemplation and love of things unseen".

Through the means of signs, symbols and words, through the action of the liturgy, the mystery of God's saving work in Christ is made present. It is the actualisation of his saving mysteries for the life of the people of God" (United States Bishop's Conference, The Theological Vision of Sacrosanctum Concilium and the Roman Missal).

The following reflection is not intended to be in any sense a complete presentation of the eucharistic liturgy or of the General Instruction, but may provide priests and Liturgy Groups with directions and guidelines for taking concrete steps in what is a never-ending process of drawing out the riches of the Church's liturgy. The Episcopal Commission for Liturgy will produce a commentary on the General Instruction in the Autumn.

The Introductory Rites

"Their purpose is to ensure that the faithful, who come together as one, establish communion and dispose themselves to listen properly to God's word and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily" (General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM], 46).

People often arrive at Mass in something of a rush. Our heads may be full of many concerns. The opening moments are very important. They remind priest and people of who we are – a community gathered in the name of Jesus Christ. The focus of the Introductory Rites is not the altar, which is the focus for the Liturgy of the Eucharist, nor the ambo, which is the focus for the Liturgy of the Word, but the celebrant's Chair. At this point the role of the celebrant is to gather the congregation into a people united in the presence of God.

The GIRM says that the Introductory Rites should be celebrated standing: "The faithful should stand from the beginning of the Entrance chant, or while the priest approaches the altar, until the end of the Collect" (GIRM, 43). We naturally think of kneeling as a sign of reverence, but the gesture by which we greet people whom we wish to honour is to stand when we come into their presence or they into ours. In the Introductory Rites we are coming as a people gathered in the presence of God. A common posture is a sign that we are united in a common activity; those who can do so without difficulty should be invited to stand during the Introductory Rites.

The Entrance Chant or hymn focuses our minds on the fact that we are gathering as a community of worship:

- It fosters our unity, by heightening our sense of being united in praising our God.
- It introduces the celebration, often reminding us of the feast or the liturgical season.
- It accompanies the procession of the priest and ministers as they approach the altar.

The Sign of the Cross sums up why we are gathered.

- It is a reminder of the words by which we were baptised into Christ.
- It is a reminder that we gather in the presence of, and in the name of, the Holy Trinity.
- It is a reminder that we gather in order to share in the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross.

The Sign of the Cross is the first of many prayers spoken by the priest during the Mass to which the congregation responds, 'Amen'. There is a great richness to this word. It reminds us that God is the 'Amen' the One who is always faithful and true (Is 65:16, Rev 3:14); it endorses and ratifies what has just been said (Jer 28:6) as when we say 'Amen to that!'; it expresses a determination to put what has been said into practice (Dt 27:18ff).

The Greeting reminds us that we are gathered in God's presence. 'The Lord be with you', and the other formulae given in the Missal, 'signify the presence of the Lord to the community gathered there' (General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 50). To reduce this moment to a mere "Good morning everybody" would obscure the point that this moment is an acknowledgement that we are a community gathered around Christ who is among us.

In the Penitential Act we recognise that we are gathered as sinful people needing and trusting in the mercy of God. Each of the four forms of the Penitential Rite has a particular character:

i) The first form, 'I confess', acknowledges our sinfulness and asks the support of the prayers of the whole congregation which has gathered to celebrate the Eucharist and of the Blessed Virgin and all the saints. In it each person expresses his/her sinfulness 'in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do'. That confession is made entrusting oneself to Almighty God in the context of the prayer of the whole Church, on earth and in heaven.

ii) The second form reflects the long tradition of repentant prayer found in the penitential psalms: 'Lord, we have sinned against you'; 'Lord show us your mercy and love'. We express our sorrow and our hope in God's mercy in words that have been used by God's People for millennia, in words inspired by God himself.

iii) The third form offers a variety of triple invocations leading to the prayer, Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy – the traditional Kyrie Eleison. It is important to note that this form is not a confession of sins, "Lord for the times when we failed to..." It is a litany of praise. The praise is not offered to God in general terms, nor to God the Father or the Holy Spirit, but to Jesus Christ, to whom the Kyrie is addressed.

iv) The Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling with holy Water may take the place of the penitential rite, on Sundays. It is particularly suitable during the Easter Season because of its emphasis on Easter and on Baptism. It thanks God for saving us from sin through the waters of Baptism and through the new life that has been given to us.

The Gloria is one of the Church's most ancient hymns and it is sung or said during the introductory rites of more solemn Masses. It is, therefore, a link with a long tradition and it is not appropriate to replace it by other hymns, even hymns that may have a similar theme.

The Collect concludes the Introductory Rites. It opens with the words, 'Let us pray' followed by a pause, which is intended to allow us to reflect that we are in the presence of God and to reflect on our own needs and petitions. The prayer focuses these attitudes in the light of the character of the feast or the season. The Collect concludes with a Trinitarian formula, usually addressed to the Father, through Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Thus the introductory rites end as they began by the invocation of the Holy Trinity.

Some points for reflection

After the Sign of the Cross and at all other points of the liturgy in which the faithful respond 'Amen', the richness of this word and the significance of the response should be highlighted and a clear and enthusiastic response should be encouraged – in some instances during the Mass this might be achieved by singing.

The congregation should be invited to stand for the Introductory Rites – that is until after the Collect.

The different possibilities available for the Penitential Rite should be used. Celebrants and Liturgy Committees might consider which form would be most suitable on particular occasions.

Where the Entrance Chant is not sung, arrangements should be made to have it recited either by the faithful, or by a

lector, or by the celebrant.

Where space allows, the Chair should be seen as a location in itself, distinct from the altar, with its own microphone (or a radio microphone). Even where there are difficulties about this, every effort should be made to provide a solution to allow for the proper celebration of the Introductory Rites.

Liturgy of the Word

“In the Readings, as explained by the Homily, God speaks to his people, opening up to them the mystery of redemption and salvation, and offering them spiritual nourishment; and Christ himself is present in the midst of the faithful through his word. By their silence and by their singing the people make God’s word their own, and they also affirm their adherence to it by means of the Profession of Faith. Finally, having been nourished by it, they pour out their petitions in the Prayer of the Faithful for the needs of the entire Church and for the salvation of the whole world” (GIRM, 55).

The Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist form a single act of worship. The former proclaims God’s covenant with his people and its fulfilment in Christ; the latter makes present the renewal of God’s covenant in the death and Resurrection of Christ.

All of the Readings, including the Responsorial Psalm, should be taken from the Bible. The reverence due to the word of God means that non-biblical readings or hymns should not be introduced into the Liturgy of the Word. In the Psalm, we do not intrude our own words; we respond to God in words inspired by God. Hymns which are not settings of the words of scripture, however apt they may appear, are not suitable for use as a Responsorial Psalm.

The ambo is the place of the Liturgy of the Word just as the altar is the place of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The respect shown to the ambo is an important expression of respect for the word of God. The ambo should not be used except during the Liturgy of the Word. It should not be used for the reading of notices, or for leading congregational singing – except in the case of the person leading the singing of the Responsorial Psalm.

Proclaiming the readings is not a function of the presiding priest. The celebrant should proclaim the readings only in the absence of a suitable reader (GIRM, 59). Nor should the celebrant proclaim the Gospel unless there is neither a deacon nor another priest present.

The proclamation of the Gospel is the climax of the Liturgy of the Word. This should be clear in the reverence with which the Book of the Gospels is treated, by the fact that the one who proclaims it is blessed beforehand or prepares himself with a prayer, by the fact that the congregation stands to express its respect, by the singing of the Alleluia verse, by incensing the Book before the reading during more solemn Masses, by the acclamation, ‘Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ’ through which the faithful “acknowledge and confess Christ present and speaking to them” (GIRM, 60).

The celebrant should normally give the Homily, but a concelebrant or a deacon may do so. For a just cause a priest who is present but cannot concelebrate may give the Homily. It should be based on the Scripture Readings or other Mass texts and should take account both of the mystery being celebrated and of the needs of the people (GIRM 65, 66).

The Creed is recited or sung on Sundays and other solemn occasions. It is the response of the gathered people to word, which has gathered them, and an acceptance of the great mysteries of faith “before these mysteries are celebrated in the Eucharist” (GIRM, 67).

The Prayer of the Faithful is also a response to the Word of God, concluding the Liturgy of the Word. The intentions may, therefore, be read from the ambo. The celebrant introduces and concludes the Prayer from the Chair. The people pray, usually in an invocation such as ‘Lord, graciously hear us’, or ‘O Lord, hear us we pray; O, Lord, give us your love’. The intentions themselves are not a prayer but a statement of what we intend to pray for. The examples given in the Missal take the form, ‘For those who...’ or ‘That God may...’. They are not, therefore, addressed to God or to Christ but to the congregation that is being invited to pray for these intentions. The intentions should normally include, the needs of the Church, public authorities and the salvation of the world, those burdened by difficulties, and the local community (GIRM 70). Intentions such as the unity of Christians, the spread of the Gospel and the welfare of those who suffer persecution, hunger and other forms of deprivation should not be neglected.

Some points for reflection

Parishes should look at ways of ensuring that those who are called upon to read the word of God are well trained, that

they are assisted in reflecting on the significance of the words that they read, words through which God speaks to his people.

The books from which the Sacred Scriptures are read in church should be dignified and in good condition (GIRM, 349). Reading from pamphlets, leaflets or photocopied pages does not convey the reverence due to the word of God. It is desirable that there be a Book of the Gospels, distinct from the Lectionary, which should be treated with particular reverence and should be of such quality as to demonstrate the respect owed to the Gospel.

In order to show the special importance of the Gospel, the Alleluia verse, in which the assembly “welcomes and greets the Lord”, should be sung (GIRM, 62). Every parish should arrange that the congregation is able to sing some settings of the Alleluia. During the Alleluia, there should, where possible, be at least a simple procession to the ambo with the Book of the Gospels.

The Liturgy of the Word should be conducted without haste, allowing moments of silence, “for example, before the Liturgy of the Word itself begins, after the First and Second Reading, and lastly at the conclusion of the Homily” (GIRM, 56). This will help to create the conditions that will allow the word of God to be grasped by people’s hearts.

Liturgy of the Eucharist

At the Last Supper Christ instituted the Paschal Sacrifice and banquet, by which the Sacrifice of the Cross is continuously made present in the Church whenever the priest, representing Christ the Lord, carries out what the Lord himself did and handed over to his disciples to be done in his memory (GIRM, 72).

The Preparation of the Altar marks the fact that the altar now becomes the focus. It is appropriate that at this point items required for the celebration should be placed on the altar to signify that a new element of the celebration is beginning. These are not offerings or gifts, so this process should be distinct from the procession of gifts.

Only what is required for the celebration of Mass should be placed on the table of the altar – the cloth, the chalice and paten, the ciboria, the corporal, the purificator, the pall, the Missal and, if necessary, a microphone. A cross and candles should be placed on or near the altar. Placing other items on that altar table risks obscuring the unique and sacred purpose of the altar, the table of the Lord, which stands as a symbol of Christ and his Father. Flowers may be placed around the altar, not on the table. On particular occasions such as funerals, First Communions and Confirmations, symbols might be placed close to the altar, but not on it. This should be done at the beginning of Mass rather than at the preparation of the altar or of the gifts.

The Preparation of the Gifts is the presentation by members of the congregation of the bread and wine, and water, which will be used in the Eucharist. Money or other gifts for the Church or the poor may also be presented but these are not placed on the altar. The meaning of this rite is confused if items are presented which are not gifts and which will later be taken back. The priest accepts the gifts of bread and wine and places them on the altar. This recalls the moment in which Christ took the bread and the cup into his hands at the Last Supper. The accompanying prayers, ‘Blessed are you...’, may be said either silently or aloud. They form a pair, so one should not be said aloud if the other has been said silently.

A sufficient number of hosts should be presented for the Communion of all who will receive.

The Prayer over the Offerings concludes the preparation. This is another moment when the congregation responds with an ‘Amen’, which should not be lost or mumbled but should be a conscious and combined endorsement of the action and of the prayer which concludes it.

The Eucharistic Prayer is “the centre and summit of the entire celebration” (GIRM, 78). This is the presidential prayer par excellence, addressed by the celebrant in the name of the whole community to God the Father through Christ his Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

In a Concelebrated Mass, after the Prayer over the Offerings, concelebrating priests approach the altar and stand around it but without crowding the celebrant and obstructing the rites, and in particular not obstructing the deacon if there is one. They should arrange themselves in such a way as to allow the congregation to see the sacred action clearly (GIRM, 215). They should recite the parts of the Eucharistic Prayer “in a very low voice” so that “the principal celebrant’s voice be clearly heard” (GIRM, 218). The voices of concelebrants should be inaudible to the congregation.

The chief elements of the Eucharistic Prayer, which occur with varying emphasis and in a different order in the different Eucharistic Prayers, are: Thanksgiving [especially in the Preface], Acclamation [Sanctus], Epiclesis

[invocations of the Holy Spirit on the gifts and on the assembly], Institution Narrative and Consecration, Anamnesis [recalling Christ and his Passion, Death and Resurrection], Offering [sacramentally making present the 'once for all' sacrifice of Christ and offering ourselves with him], Intercessions [made in union with the Pope and bishops, for all members of the Church, living and dead] and the final Doxology (GIRM 79).

The Dialogue at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer once again reminds us that we are a people gathered in the Lord, 'The Lord be with you...' This dialogue also makes it clear that the Eucharistic Prayer is spoken by the priest in the person of Christ, 'and also with you' or, more literally, 'and with your spirit', which is a reference to the spirit that was given to the priest in ordination. He also prays the Eucharistic prayer on behalf of all, so all are invited to lift up their hearts and to give thanks to the Lord their God. For the same reason, the Prayer is always expressed in the first person plural, 'We come to you, Father...'

The Preface is not a preface in the ordinary sense of the word. It is an integral part of the Eucharistic Prayer, expressing praise and thanksgiving to God for his goodness, often with particular reference to the feast or season being celebrated.

The Sanctus is a conscious joining of our praise and thanksgiving with that of all the angels and saints. "In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that earthly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle" (Vatican II, Liturgy Constitution, 8)

In addition to the four principal Eucharistic Prayers, a number of others are available: two Eucharistic Prayers for Reconciliation, three Eucharistic Prayers for Children and the Eucharistic Prayer for Masses for Various Needs and Occasions (with four variations). This last prayer is designed especially for use with Votive Masses, such as those for families, for vocations, in thanksgiving, for the ministers of the Church, for pastoral and spiritual meetings. There is a great richness in this variety of Eucharistic Prayers.

The Memorial Acclamation after the Consecration should, where at all possible, be sung. It is an expression of faith in the mystery of faith: the Paschal Mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ and the presence among us of Christ risen from the dead and seated at the right hand of his Father.

During the Doxology the celebrant elevates the paten with the Host and the chalice. If there is a deacon, he elevates the chalice; in a concelebrated Mass without a deacon one of the concelebrants does so. The practice whereby other concelebrants elevate ciboria, chalices etc, has no basis and can obscure the meaning of this central moment, rendering it confused and untidy. This is the main elevation of the Mass. The GIRM uses the word 'elevation' here but says that the Host and Chalice are 'shown' to the people after the Consecration.

The doxology may be spoken by concelebrants with the principal celebrant. It should not, however, be said or sung by the congregation. This would eclipse the Great Amen, the climactic moment in which God's people endorse and ratify the prayer that has been offered in their name. Unless there are very strong reasons making this impossible, the doxology and the Great Amen should be sung, even if only recto tono. Music can help to bring out the true importance of the Great Amen showing it to be the acclamation by which the people confirm and conclude the Eucharistic Prayer (GIRM 79). St Jerome speaks of the faithful of Rome who pronounce the word 'Amen' so loudly and so repeatedly that "it sounded like a roll of thunder".

The rites that intervene between the end of the Eucharistic Prayer and the beginning of the Communion direct us to the love, unity and reconciliation that should mark those who receive the Lord in Communion and which is, indeed, the fruit of receiving him.

The Lord's Prayer is an acknowledgement that we are one family because we have one Father in heaven. The 'daily bread' has a Eucharistic echo; the call to mutual forgiveness is a reminder of the Lord's instruction to 'go, first be reconciled with your brother and then come and offer your gift' (Mt 5:22). The acclamation, 'For the kingdom the power and the glory...' echoes the opening lines, hallowed be thy name (glory), thy kingdom come (kingdom), thy will be done (power). As the prayer of God's family it should be recited or sung by all.

The Sign of Peace reflects the riches of the biblical idea of shalom – perfect harmony and well being which is God's gift won for us by Christ. The prayer which the priest says before inviting people to offer each other the sign of peace, looks to the peace and unity in which Christ reigns with his Father in the kingdom, power and glory which we have just proclaimed. The people endorse this prayer with their 'Amen', asserting our trust in Christ's farewell gift of peace and our hope of sharing in the peace and unity of his kingdom. The sign of peace is not 'passed on' from the priest to the rest of the congregation, as was the case in the pre-conciliar liturgy. Each person shares the sign of peace with those

who are nearby. Christ, the source of our peace is present and active in the midst of all those who gather in his name.

In the early Church the whole Eucharist was known as The Breaking of Bread. The grains of wheat, and the grapes, that go to make up the bread and wine for the Eucharist, are a sign of the one-ness into which we are gathered by sharing Christ's Body and Blood and thus becoming more closely united with him and with each other. "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). The GIRM says that at this point the priest (and concelebrants) "break the hosts for Communion, both of the concelebrants and of the people" (GIRM, 240). It would clearly be impossible to break hosts for every member of a large congregation. But it should not be the norm that the members of the congregation never receive a host that has been broken, recalling the ancient and fundamental symbolism of breaking bread.

After the priest's private prayer of preparation, the Communion begins with the celebrant's invitation, "This is the Lamb of God...", which combines the texts of John 1:29 and Rev 19:9.

The reception of Jesus truly present in Holy Communion should be approached with the greatest reverence. The liturgy provides for expressions of respect that should be carried out consciously and carefully. Before receiving Communion people should be fasting for at least an hour. After the invitation, priest and people together recite words based on the prayer of the centurion whose servant was ill (Mt 8:8; Lk 7:6,7), "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you..." Moving towards the altar or other Communion station should be seen not as a mere queue. It is a procession, which symbolises our journey towards our destination where the Risen Christ awaits us, our approach to receive the Food for which we hunger. When the priest says, "The Body of Christ" he is calling on the communicant to express his or her faith that Jesus Christ is really present, body, blood, soul and divinity; he is also calling for an expression of faith that those who share Christ's Body are themselves his Body. If the Body of Christ is received in the hand, this is not a gesture of taking but of receiving. The two hands should form a throne for the reverent reception of the King of Heaven.

The celebrant presides at the whole celebration. While the number of communicants may indicate that he requires assistance, he should not leave this most important moment to others. Apart from a case of physical infirmity, he should distribute Holy Communion to the faithful. It is he who invites them to share in the Supper of the Lamb and even if he has to call on the assistance of others, he, who is privileged to preside in the person of Christ, should be among those who offer the Lord's Body to the Lord's people. He should not remain at the altar, taking no part in distributing the Eucharist to the congregation, while others – even if these are priests or deacons – do so.

"It is most desirable that the faithful, just as the priest is obliged to do, receive the Lord's Body from hosts consecrated at the same Mass..." (GIRM, 85). This point had already been clearly made by the Second Vatican Council (Liturgy Constitution, 55, cf also Redemptionis Sacramentum, 88). Taking a ciborium from the tabernacle should be the exception. It is hard to conceive of a situation that would justify taking two, three, even four ciboria from the tabernacle. Hosts should always be consecrated at a Mass with the people.

All those who participate in the Mass with the necessary dispositions are invited to receive Holy Communion. There may, however, be people in the congregation who recognise that there is some impediment to their reception of the Eucharist. They should not feel in any way pressurised to receive, for instance by a 'regimented' approach to the altar, bench by bench.

Those who are living in a union which is not, and perhaps cannot be, recognised by the Church may not receive the Eucharist. They are, however, encouraged to attend Mass, and the whole community should "make sure that they do not consider themselves as separated from the Church" (JOHN PAUL II, Familiaris Consortio, 84). A custom has arisen, which does justice to these two aspects by inviting those who do not receive Communion to come forward for a blessing, with their hands crossed. The same invitation might be extended to those who cannot receive because they are members of other Christian denominations.

There should be a period of silence and/or a song of praise. If there is a time of silence, all, including the ministers, should take part in it. This is a time for quiet contemplation.

The Prayer after Communion concludes the Communion Rite and asks that the fruits of the mystery, which has just been celebrated by this congregation, may be experienced in their lives.

Some points for reflection

Consider how best to ensure that so far as possible people receive Communion from hosts consecrated at the Mass in which they participate.

More use might be made of the variety of Eucharistic Prayers.

The doxology should be sung where possible, even if recto tono, and some settings of the Great Amen should be learned and sung whenever there is a congregation.

An understanding of the meaning of the Sign of Peace – not a mere greeting, but a sharing of the peace which is Christ's gift to us – could be fostered by reflecting on it in the context of the rich Biblical idea of shalom.

The signs of reverence that the liturgy provides for the reception of Holy Communion should be referred to and explained from time to time.

How might it best be indicated to people who cannot, or do not wish to, receive the Eucharist should not feel under any pressure to do so, that they are welcome as part of the assembly and that they should feel free to approach for a blessing?

In a world which can be so busy and noisy it is important not to neglect the moment of silence or a reflective hymn that should take place after Communion

Concluding Rites

Only at this point should any announcements or notices be read. They should not interrupt the time of thanksgiving; they are not part of the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

The Priest's Greeting echoes the opening, 'The Lord be with you'. The community gathered in the Lord's presence, now, still in the presence of Christ who promised to be always with his people, they go out to bear that presence into their whole lives. The Eucharist which has just been celebrated is the summit of the Christian life; it is also the source from which we derive the strength to live and share the faith we have received and celebrated.

The Blessing reinforces the awareness that God goes with us. Several Prayers over the People and more solemn forms of Blessing are provided.

In the Dismissal the priest or deacon sends the congregation out to love and serve the Lord. Christians are called to evangelise and to be witnesses. "Given this, the Prayer after Communion and the Concluding Rite – the Final Blessing and Dismissal – need to be better valued and appreciated, so that all who have shared in the Eucharist may come to a deeper sense of the responsibility that is entrusted to them (JOHN PAUL II, Dies Domini, 45). The Mass concludes with the congregation praising and thanking God for their encounter with the Risen Christ in the mystery of the Eucharist, 'Thanks be to God'.

+Donal Murray

Bishop of Limerick