



EVANGELIZING

New Vision - New Directions

CATECHESIS

2016 Reflections

Article 11. Catechesis and Liturgy

By Timothy P. O'Malley

In both the catechetical and liturgical movements of the early 20th century, the formative and thus evangelizing nature of the liturgy was emphasized. Revisiting the article “Catechesis and Liturgy” (2000) by Jacquelyne Witter, one encounters the robust vision of liturgical prayer as an encounter with the person of Christ, a vision discernable in the Church’s magisterial documents. In some ways, there is little to update relative to the pastoral liturgical theology present in this article insofar as it remains a vision of the Church’s greatest desire for liturgy’s formative power.

On the other hand, it may be worthwhile to discern anew the unique pastoral situation that the Church in the United States is experiencing at present. Participation in the liturgical and sacramental rites of the Church continues to decline, particularly around marriage and infant baptism. Young adults are infrequent participants in the weekly Eucharistic liturgy, such that “very active” Millennials may be praying at the liturgy once a month at best. Liturgical prayer itself competes in a marketplace of various forms of “transcendent” experiences, which are often more attractive to those on the margins of Catholic identity including concerts, athletic events, and mass political gatherings. The presence of these cultural obstacles cannot be disconnected in fostering an evangelical, liturgical catechesis in the 21st century.

However, cultural critique cannot simply be leveled at the “world.” Rather, the Church often suffers from approaches to liturgical practice that seem divorced from the life-giving love of the triune God. Homiletics, an integral aspect of the liturgical life of the Church, is often underemphasized in seminary programs, leading to homilies that do not capture the imagination of the assembly. Liturgical music either capitulates to a desire to entertain or suffers from an inadequate theological vision, one that may perhaps contribute to what Christian Smith calls Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. The architecture of the Church, intended to invite the one praying into the sanctified liturgy of the cosmos, is often comparable to a suburban shopping mall. The devotional life of the parish is undeveloped, relying too much upon the weekly Eucharist to lead the worshipper to a “personal” encounter with Christ. Formation for the sacraments presumes a lively faith, which is absent among those approaching the sacraments themselves.

Thus, an evangelizing, liturgical formation for our age will necessarily include a rebuilding of an entire civilization in which such prayer makes sense. It will include a retrieval of sanctified images among Catholics, a renewed focus on the imagination in liturgical hymnody, homiletics, and the arts as a

whole. It will involve a retrieval of fundamental practices introduced in the context of the domestic church; practices that dispose the worshipper toward fruitful participation in the rites. It will involve re-building a civilization in which solidarity trumps individual experience; in which the purpose of the liturgy is not my “entertainment” or “feeling” but participation in Christ’s body. And, lastly, it will necessitate commencing liturgical and sacramental catechesis not with an explication of the fundamental symbols or signs of prayer but with introducing the student to the kerygma of the sacramental life of the Church to begin with. Of the God who has become one of us, desiring to share God’s very self, so that all of human life might become divine.

If there is work to do in liturgical and sacramental catechesis today (and I believe there is), it will not be in returning again to the magisterial documents alone. Rather, it will necessitate thinking through the unique cultural problems operative in late modern American life. And discerning how liturgical prayer can once again foster a renewal of the imagination of each participant, allowing the Catholic in the present age to present one’s whole self as an offering of love to the God who first loved us.

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