

**“Let us pray with confidence”:
Leaders of the Assembly Prepare**

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“Let us pray with confidence in the words our Savior gave us,” calls out the presider to the assembly. Or, perhaps, another introduction is used: “As our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say,” for example. Or, perhaps, the presider simply begins—enacting the confidence that the introductory texts call for—the assembly easily catching on that this is a communal act and joining in: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name ...” In any case, here is an archetypal act of presiding: the leader proposing an important, beloved and known-by-heart act of prayer and drawing the entire assembly into its practice in a known-by-heart place.

Indeed, this particular prayer is so central that it may stand for all of the assembly’s liturgy. It is one of the summary gifts of baptism, a central pillar of that catechism handed over to us as we come to join the Christian assembly or as we rehearse, lifelong, the meaning of our assembly participation. It recurs in every Eucharist, the table prayer of the community, the final text of *eucharistia*, as if we come to the end of the presider’s best effort—“praying and giving thanks as well as she or he can”—and we stutter out again “Lord, teach us to pray” as the best conclusion we can give to our common thanksgiving at this holy meal. And it summarizes our prayers, morning and evening, whether at the conclusion of a formal sung office or in simple family or personal devotions, reminding us in those places, again and again, of baptism and of Eucharist.

So, the invitation into this prayer can stand as a *symbol* of the entire act of presiding, a symbol indeed that is an actual and significant instance of the thing symbolized. More: the invitation into this prayer might be seen as a symbol for all leadership in the assembly. The rehearsed voices of the congregation, after all—the cantor and the choir—also enable the whole assembly to enter into central and known-by-heart texts and actions. The leaders of intercessions give voice to the communal cry for the coming of that reign of God which is the central concern of the prayer, the coming of that time when justice is done and all tears begin to be wiped away. The ministers of communion, indeed, are actually passing out our daily bread.

So, in another sense, are the lectors. Let the invitation for the assembly to pray the Lord's Prayer stand for leadership in the assembly generally.

Then, could we learn about preparation for leadership by considering what it is to prepare to lead the Lord's Prayer? *Prepare to lead the Lord's Prayer?* Really? Don't leaders know the prayer by heart? What help is there in that? But that is just the point. Might there not be help in considering how and why a leader comes to know certain central matters by heart and how he or she then brings these matters into the assembly? Say it this way: the leader knows the prayer and knows its place in the communal ritual in order to bring the prayer into the assembly. That is preparation. Then, the leader thinks about the meaning of the prayer and imagines how that meaning holds the meaning of the assembly. That is preparation. And, the leader gives others access to the prayer, teaches it, passes it on, learns it again as in a lifelong catechumenate, uses the tensions and juxtapositions of the prayer precisely to enable such access. That is preparation. So, join me in thinking about these three things: Learning the task by heart; imagining the meaning of the assembly; giving access to others. The leaders of the assembly prepare.

Learning the Task by Heart

"Learning by heart"—that is a remarkable phrase, probably deeper, more resonant than simply "memorizing." Say it this way: let the text and the task and the shape of the ritual event and your role in relationship to the others—all of this—be imprinted on your body. Let your knowledge of the Lord's Prayer be a symbol here. I often want to urge presiders and other liturgical ministers to know by heart, like they know the Lord's Prayer, at least some of the texts for which they bear responsibility in the assembly: the apostolic greeting, the *kyrie*-bids, the collects, the incipits and conclusions of readings, the preface dialogue, the *verba testamenti*, the benediction and dismissal, and the entrance dialogue and the thanksgiving for light in evening prayer, for example. There is a remarkable freedom in such knowledge, a freedom to begin to see that liturgy is not in the book but in the present actions of the assembly, a freedom to begin to invest the text with the gift of your self. Indeed, the texts begin to hold you.

But an even more important preparation is this: know in your heart, imprinted in your flesh, the deep structures of the liturgy. Know the simple structure of the collect and the more complex shape of the *eucharistia*. Know then the structure of collect as the presidential summary prayer of entrance, the *eucharistia* as words for the community's

eating and drinking. Know how a psalm receives the first reading and an alleluia verse greets the gospel and a hymn of the day puts the whole liturgy of the word finally into the assembly's mouth. Know by heart the structure of the Lord's Prayer itself and of the Lord's Prayer used at the end of the *eucharistia* and before the communion. Know the shape of the limited but significant number of small structures that unfold in our communal action. More: know, in your bones, the deep structure of the whole *ordo*, so that you may be able to lead others in its practice with peaceful and transparent simplicity, with economy of movement and speech, with your body attending to the central things and to the flow of their connections, and with your bodily attention underscoring their importance. Ritual structures then may become in our hands what they really are: patterns of meaningful communal action, not just pedagogical tools in the classroom. Planning for liturgy then becomes the clear, simple, local unfolding of these structures, not their obfuscation by the inclusion of too many things that have no ritual intention and no purpose except their beauty or their individual, supposedly "religious" meaning.

An even more important preparation yet is this: learn by heart, marked on your body, that this is indeed a communal undertaking. The presider is inviting others into the practice of the prayer: "Let us pray with confidence ... ," she or he calls out. In spite of our widespread North American cultural experience, the prayer is not an individual exercise: "give *us*, forgive *us*, save *us*," we say, and that communal meaning must be learned again by heart, in the first case by the presider. Indeed, the presider yields the prayer to the entire assembly, just as he or she is constantly yielding the "floor" to others throughout the liturgy, presiding simply by doing nothing except giving earnest attention. All the other leaders ought also be drawing in the others. They are "assisting ministers" assisting the *assembly*, not servers to the presider's Mass, not performers in an individual, virtuoso aria. The most important symbol of Christ in the room is not you, not the altar, not even the bread and wine or the water of the font: it is the assembly. And your body must show that truth, not in servile hesitancy, but in dignified and gracious attention, your confidence evoking the assembly's responding confidence that this is so. Your body must show that truth, even and especially if your congregation's building does not. Perhaps, if you are a presider, you may make a deep bow to the assembly, as you enter upon your task. In any case, at significant moments of your leadership, you will greet and be greeted by the assembly, in the Spirit of the risen one, once again enacting the nature of your call. Even if you are not a presider, the spirit of these interchanges needs to be

your spirit as well. The body learns by heart, has imprinted upon it, the sense that every text—even a lectionary text—either has a response or is used on behalf of the whole, that every action is intended to invite the participating assembly. Such is the way that a leader must learn every text, every act by heart.

To assert this, of course, implies that a lifetime of learning by heart is needed. Indeed, those presiders whom we call and ordain, in company with as much of the whole church as will join in the communion that recognizes this call, are principally men and women who are willing to think that opening up the communal book, giving thanks at the communal table, standing at the communal bathing-pool, and yielding to others—as the world sees it, the manipulations of a few words, a little water, bits of bread and wine, combined then with doing nothing—are actions that are worth a lifetime of preparation. I am hoping that assisting ministers and deacons, lectors and bishops, intercessors, cantors, cupbearers, and doorkeepers will similarly find a lifetime of joy in learning their assembly tasks by heart. Leaders of the assembly prepare with their whole life.

But I also mean to imply that actual, weekly rehearsal is a good idea. To stand in the place of the assembly—together with the other ministers or alone—to imagine the flow of the event, to consider where each person is to be and where the door will be open to yet others, to try on the words and the music in the space, to get one's body around the actions again, to train one's stance to be open and communally responsive, to pray for those who will come and those who will not, to savor and treasure the importance of assembly, to learn it by heart—this also is to prepare. By “learning by heart,” I do not mean to imply that no new words are ever used. On the contrary, the deepest knowledge by heart will be the knowledge of the shape and purpose of assembly action. Then continual and vital attention to the constant task of translating, in company with all the church, will be one important way the deep structure is brought to expression and not obscured. Someone who truly knows, in the bones, the deep structures of the assembly may at last be the person who can pray the intercessions or the great thanksgiving “freely” and still be speaking the church's biblical, contemporary, traditional language, though that is a challenge to take up with trembling—and probably only, with Polycarp, when you are 86!

Indeed, the sermon itself—a primary example of fresh words brought into the assembly—needs to be “learned by heart.” I do not mean “memorized.” But whether one uses notes or a manuscript, the place and function of the sermon, its deep structure and its ritual purpose, its

openness to the assembly and its fidelity to the assembly's purpose, its honesty and its lack of idiosyncratic affectation, its reception of the readings and its leading to the intercessions and to the table, its articulation of the whole flow of the *ordo*, its use, in Lutheran terms, of law and gospel, *need to be learned by heart*, and imprinted on the body. The very idea that preaching is part of the liturgy, subject to its principles and purposes, may be a new proposal to many of us, but it is very important and could be the source of renewal and hope in the face of the current American confusion about what preaching is *for*.

Something very similar might be said about the choir, those assembly leaders of the communal song. They, too, need to learn the structure of the *ordo* by heart.

Perhaps what I mean by "learning the task by heart," however, is best conveyed by several pithy quotations from two of the finest thinkers about the art of liturgical leadership. Aidan Kavanagh writes:

Ministers must not pose or seem pompous; neither should they be careless or seem to be self-conscious, flippant or condescending. They must be and seem to be completely attuned to the nature of the event and the assembly celebrating it. A sense of natural physical grace in deportment, a sense of simple dignity, a certain self-discipline with regard to personal idiosyncracies translate into a general impression by the assembly of its being respected and competently served by its liturgical ministers. The minister at the liturgy, like a Zen-master, should be as "uninteresting" as a glass of cold, clear, nourishing water.¹

And:

The common end for which the diverse liturgical ministries work is not a ceremony but a corporate life in faithful communion with all God's holy people and holy things.... The minister, especially the one who presides, should know both the assembly and its liturgy so well that his [or her] looks, words, and gestures have a confident and easy grace about them. [A presider] presides not over the assembly but within it, ... does not lead it but serves it, ... is the speaker of its house of worship. [The presider's] decisions must never be gratuitous. They may sometimes be wrong, but they must always be steeped in a sense of reverent pastoral responsibility that is completely infused with the assembly and its tradition of liturgical worship. The sort of ministerial discretion this requires is a high art more important than any rubric ever written....²

¹Aidan Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite: A Handbook of Liturgical Style* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1982), 53.

²*Ibid.*, 12–13.

And: "To be consumed with worry over making a liturgical mistake is the greatest mistake of all. Reverence is a virtue, not a neurosis, and God can take care of himself."³

Robert Hovda writes:

... the presider has a function with regard to the other ministers as well as to the assembly as a whole. The presider facilitates, discreetly yields the focus to the one who is operating at a particular moment, guides, prompts when necessary, leads the congregation in attending to the action. This is not easy for clergy who are accustomed to doing everything.⁴

Hovda goes on to say:

The presider must be keenly aware of and thoroughly familiar with both the structure and the individual parts of the celebration. This is not the kind of awareness and familiarity that is gained by five minutes in the sacristy . . . before the service starts. And even the best "master of ceremonies" is no substitute for the confidence and assurance of the one who presides.⁵

So, let us pray with confidence, learning the task by heart. We could easily spend the rest of this Institute reflecting on just these points about the art of liturgical leadership. But there is more.

Imagining the Meaning of the Assembly

There is, for example, the meaning of the prayer itself, the prayer into which the presider invites the assembly, the prayer known by heart. Besides giving a model of heart-learning, the Lord's Prayer also provides liturgical leaders with an important means to imagine the meaning of the assembly. Indeed, we can find a central and summary liturgical theology in considering the prayer. And the possibility of imagining what the assembly is actually *for* may be the most important preparation of all for the assembly's leadership.

Consider, for a moment, the meaning of the Lord's Prayer. Primitive liturgical data points to an ancient eschatological understanding of the actual gathering of Christians, and that data includes the Lord's Prayer

³Ibid., 31.

⁴Robert W. Hovda, *Strong, Loving and Wise: Presiding in Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984), 19.

⁵Ibid., 26–27.

itself. The prayer breathes a sense of eschatology. It is filled with petitions for the coming of the Day of God, together with some fear for the terrors expected in the last times. “Make your name holy, we beg you,” we may paraphrase the prayer of the community. “Let your reign come; do your will on earth as you do it in the universe.” It is *God* who is besought to act. The prayer is beseeching God, not subtle messages to us. The community also prays, “Do not bring us to the test,” for we fear we will fail; and in any case, we beg, “deliver us from the evil one.” All of these pleadings are turned toward a still coming, hoped-for, feared event. But in the midst of these urgent petitions, juxtaposed to their pleading, are also two strong indications that the expected, longed-for day has already dawned in the life of the community itself. “Give us today the bread of the feast before your face,” one petition might be translated, indicating the confident trust of the community that God is free to make its meal in Christ already to be a beginning of the life-giving feast of the end-times. And, when we remember that “forgiveness” was primarily a thing to hope for from God at the end, the other petition is equally stunning, equally celebrative of the actual presence of the end: “Forgive us now with your final forgiveness, just as we are turning to each other, ministers of your reconciliation.”

According to this prayer, the community of Christians is just like everyone else—longing for God, in need of mercy and life, hopeful, fearful, likely to fail. Yet in two characteristics of its real assemblies—in shared bread and in mutual forgiveness—it already trusts that God is making it the assembly of the end-time, the assembly around God’s life-giving feast.

So take again this matter of the Lord’s Prayer, this matter so basic to Christian liturgy. Both the theological and the ecclesiological bases of the healthy practice of assembly can be clarified by the consideration of the liturgical use of that classic and form-giving prayer. Liturgical leaders may learn there again to understand the character and importance of the assembly they lead. We have said that as one of the gifts Christians have from their baptism, the Lord’s Prayer is repeated Sunday after Sunday in the Eucharist and every day in the prayers of the church. But we must see that our communal insertion into this prayer does not distinguish us from the rest of needy humanity. Rather, the prayer in our mouths causes us to articulate with honesty the human condition in which we share. To pray the prayer of Jesus is to identify, as he did, with human need, sorrow, sin, and death. Borrowing the terms of first century Jewish eschatology, we cry out our need for the “reign of God,” for the day to come when God’s life-giving intention for all things is openly enacted. Yet, fearfully, aware

that such a “day” will be full of “trials” we do not think we can pass, thinking that any such goodness must also be attended by great pain, we also beg to be spared, delivered in the midst of the horrors. By such a prayer, Christians stand with all humanity, in its need and in its fear. In such a prayer, the church exercises its priesthood for the world, making the “our” and the “us” of the petitions as broad as it can imagine. This articulation of human need before God makes up a basic Christian practice.

Let the leaders of the assembly know this priesthood of the assembly on behalf of the world. Let them know with sympathy and love how they are not distinguished here from the rest of humanity but are rather a voice of need and prayer. Let them, thus, know where they actually are and what time it is. Let them see that an insertion in the actual local situation of their communities, a knowledge of the news, the ability to weep and laugh with real people, attention to such literature and film and other arts as honestly evoke current estimations of the human condition, and awareness of the state of the local land and wildlife—all these are preparations for the assembly and its leadership. Let them also come as beggars for the sake of themselves and the world. Let them not imagine their vestments or their ritual practice as anything else than an underlining of the significance of this prayer on behalf of all the world. Leaders of the assembly prepare by imagining, understanding, interiorizing this purpose of the assembly as priesthood for the world.

At the same time, in the heart of the prayer we ask God with an astonishing confidence—there is that word again—to forgive us now and to give us bread now. Again we borrow first-century Jewish apocalyptic language, but here we find that language transformed, reversed. These things are the presence now of expected end-time gifts. Only God forgives, and that at the end. Only God will spread the great, life-giving feast—at the end. Here, in the assembly, in celebration of the actual presence of these things, Christians turn to each other in mutual forgiveness that corresponds to and receives God’s forgiveness now, and the community holds a meal it believes already to be God’s meal. More, the assembly is sent into the world to forgive, and the assembly shares food with the hungry. Its daily meals and its personal interactions are invited to echo and extend the assembly, to become focused signs of the presence of God’s life-giving grace.

Let the leaders know and treasure that bread and forgiveness. Let their preparations focus on these things, their music enthrone them, and their bearing and their gestures attend to them. In their planning let them stand

forth in simplicity as the heart of the meeting. In the Lord's Prayer itself, these are the central practices of the assembly. Preparation for leadership in the assembly will be preparation to keep them central, strong, simple, unobscured, clear, accessible.

I have long found it interesting to think about the fact that Justin Martyr, in his second-century description of the assembly, narrated three tasks carried by the presider: preaching a biblical homily after the reading of the readings; giving thanks at table, "as well as he is able," and seeing to it that the collection was distributed to the poor. And I have sometimes proposed that a seminary curriculum could be organized around these tasks: biblical knowledge and oral skill for the preacher; the knowledge of liturgical forms—"by heart"—for the presider; and accurate and critical skills in social analysis and community organization for the one who calls for and helps to distribute what we call "benevolence." But at their heart, all three tasks come down to bread and forgiveness, to the core of the Lord's Prayer. So do the central undertakings of the other liturgical ministries: "bread" in the holy meal, in the word that leads to the holy meal, in the sending of signs of communion to the absent and the wretched; "forgiveness" in the bath, in the absolution, in the sermon, in the peace, in communion, and in the sending. The bearing and stance of the liturgical ministers, their words and their music, the quality of their attention must show that they understand—and richly imagine—these to be the central gifts at the heart of the assembly.

All these things, alive in the prayer, are "practices." They involve us in enacting things we believe God is doing. That enacting is first of all ritual, communal, repetitive: the prayer itself, but also ritual acts of mutual forgiveness and the ritual meal. Then our hearts and lives are invited to follow—in forgiving others, in exercising hospitality at all of our meals, in "sending portions to those for whom nothing is prepared," as Nehemiah 8 has it. Such practices are non-distancing and non-distinguishing. They still do not separate us from the rest of humanity, the condition of which the prayer so eloquently articulates. On the contrary, they connect us, in bread and forgiveness.

So, the theology of the prayer is this: God is the one to whom we pray, before whom humanity is full of both longing and fear. More: God is the one who in Jesus Christ has come to be with humanity, in its longing, need, and death. Since the prayer is regarded as being taught to us by Jesus, as being therefore an extension of his presence, its articulation of that human need is a concrete sign of the incarnation, of God's coming all the way into needy death. More: God is the one who—in the resurrection

of Jesus poured out in the assembly through the presence of the Spirit—has begun to give here both forgiveness and bread as a first taste of the healing of all harms.

The uniqueness of the prayer thus does not lie in its use of the word “Father.” With that word, the Christian community simply joins the rest of humanity—for example, the ancient Romans who called on *Zeus Pater, Jupiter*—in calling out to the divine. The uniqueness of the prayer is found, rather, in our having the articulation of need from and together with Jesus and in the presence of bread and forgiveness, thus in the *trinitarian* heart of the prayer. For this God is not three gods, but one life-giving God. Such a trinitarian theology can be seen as manifested by the three reference points of the prayer, all enfolded in the divine unity: God who is addressed; Jesus who teaches us the prayer of need; and the presence in this assembly of the fulfillment of the prayer in bread and forgiveness, the risen body of Christ restored and given away. Leaders need to know this trinitarian theology and embody it. That is preparation.

The ecclesiology of the prayer is this: The assembly is the community given this prayer, taught it in baptism, repeating it at Eucharist, invited to stand articulately with humanity—indeed, with all things—where Christ is amid the need and fear. The assembly is the community which, by the power of the Spirit and the presence of the risen one, is given now, as an earnest gift of all that God intends for the world, the bread and forgiveness that the world needs. The assembly is the community, therefore, which confesses the enfolding presence of the triune God and which is called to practice the word of forgiveness and the meal of resurrection. Leaders need to know this ecclesiology and embody it. That is preparation.

The practices of the Christian assembly are all like those of the Lord’s Prayer: praying the prayer, being consciously present to and part of human need, knowing our need of God, waiting for God, yet tasting the forgiveness and bread of God’s presence, mutually forgiving each other, holding the meal, finding its echo in all of our meals, bearing witness to God. For our meetings to be transformed into witnesses to the Day of God, we do need to do something. We do need to set out the word of forgiveness and the bread. Leaders help us do that.

Leaders with a clear conception of the assembly are needed in order to set out the center of the meeting in strength, to attend to the open door, to help all—weak and strong, fearful and courageous—to come in, and to set the ecclesiology of the Lord’s Prayer in critical dialogue with local congregational practices. Leaders are needed to teach the local Christians

what the *Didascalia* called upon the ancient bishop to teach the congregation:

Do not consider your worldly affairs more important than the word of God; but on the Lord's day leave everything and dash eagerly to your church, for it is your glory.... What excuse before God have those who do not assemble on the Lord's day to hear the word of life and to be nourished with the divine food which abides forever?⁶

Indeed, in a time when meeting together at all may be in some trouble, leaders are called upon to teach the nature of the *ekklesia*. Leaders are needed to help the local assembly gather around those things that are worth running toward: not just ourselves or our ideas or our membership procedures, but the word and food of life, bread and forgiveness.

The meaning of the assembly can be articulated in other ways, although, if they are faithful, those ways will be in continuity with the theology and ecclesiology of the Lord's Prayer. But the principal point is this: Leaders of the assembly prepare by imagining again how important the assembly actually is, how its bread and forgiveness hold us into faith and hope and orient us in a needy, beloved world. They then come with new vigor and confidence to their assembly tasks, that imagination inscribed upon their bodies as they enter into the community. So, let us pray with confidence, imagining anew the meaning of the assembly as articulated in the prayer. We could spend the rest of the institute discussing this liturgical theology and ecclesiology. But there is more.

Giving Access to Others

There is another text from the *Didascalia* that is of importance to presiders and to all liturgical leaders:

But if a poor man or woman should arrive, whether from your own congregation or from another—and especially if they are elderly—, and there is no place for them, then you, the bishop, with all your heart provide a place for them, even if you have to sit on the ground.⁷

Here is counsel for the prepared heart of every liturgical minister. Not only are we to understand our identification with needy humanity; we are

⁶Sebastian Brock, ed. and trans., *The Liturgical Portions of the Didascalia*, introduction by Michael Vasey (Bramcote, England: Grove Books, 1982), 17–18.

⁷Ibid., 17.

actively to open the door to the assembly. Indeed, to turn again to the Lord's Prayer, the Christian history of the use of the prayer is also a history of giving it away, teaching it to those who are coming into the assembly, giving access to it to others. The prayer does not only give us words for identification with all the world's needs. It also gives us an instrument to be handed on—"traditioned"—to those who are coming to the assembly, giving the very least of them equal dignity with us in the priestly ministry of the body of Christ. Preparation for leadership of the assembly will always involve a participation in giving access to the texts and practices of the assembly to others.

The classic name for the practice of so passing on the materials of the assembly is "the catechumenate." And one of the major texts of the "catechism," the summary texts of the catechumenate, is the Lord's Prayer. It is the symbol and summary of the community passing on to come-who-may the deep structure of the community's way of prayer. I want to argue that some kind of participation in "catechumenate" always belongs to the ongoing preparation of the leaders of the assembly. Making the door open is an assembly practice, watched over by the ministers of the assembly during the actual liturgy, like the *Didascalia's* bishop. Giving access to that open door is also an ongoing practice of preparation for the assembly.

What do I mean? If you have a ministry in the assembly, I hope you are also passing on its texts and practices, teaching its gifts. Perhaps you are teaching the Lord's Prayer and the other texts of the liturgy to your children or grandchildren. Perhaps you are helping them have a sense of the meeting's meaning and flow, helping them be skilled in its tasks, helping them see its connections to ordinary life. Perhaps you are sometimes sitting beside someone in church, helping them know what is happening, making a book or a gesture accessible. Perhaps you say to a stranger "come and see" and then describe the assembly and its practice a little, promising to help further in the assembly itself and afterward. Perhaps you write or teach formally, in parish or school, making knowledge and skill in liturgy and rich awareness of the liturgical connections to daily life central themes of your work. Or perhaps you formally participate in the catechumenate, as sponsor or catechist or musician, as pastor or bishop—discussing the faith by discussing the assembly's lectionary, passing on the musical resources of the church by helping people have a voice again for the assembly's hymnody, teaching the texts of the liturgy—the very texts of the catechism—praying for the catechumens, holding a bishop's Mass for them, and talking with them

about what it means for you that you are baptized and a member of the assembly. I hope so. For in so doing you will, among other things, be learning again yourself, coming again as little one and beggar side-by-side with beggars and little ones. You will be profoundly preparing for the assembly.

A principal of such teaching—and therefore of your preparation for the assembly—will be knowledge of the juxtapositions with which the liturgy is filled. Word and sacrament, law and gospel, texts and preaching, thanksgiving and eating and drinking, the week and Sunday, teaching and bathing, the year and pascha are staples, of course, structures by which the liturgy is learned and taught and led. But so are the conditions of their exercise: assembly and its leadership, reverence and welcome, hospitality and holy regard, strong center and open door.

Strong center and open door might be one way to say what the Lord's Prayer itself images: Open door to the reality of the condition of the world, strong center in bread and forgiveness, open door to bread and forgiveness, and strong center in priestly identity of the assembly for the sake of the life of the world. Passing on the skills of the community in being marked by both these themes of the prayer is one of the central ways to prepare for leadership in the assembly. So, let us pray with confidence, giving access to others to the heart of the prayer, helping others to be held by the prayer. We could spend the rest of this institute discussing assembly leaders preparing by being participants in the catechumenate and by being life-long catechumens themselves. But, for now, this is enough.

I do not want to overwhelm you with the list of these preparatory tasks. In fact, I beg you to remember that, for the most part, I have been speaking about a lifelong preparation. Pastors and presiders are not called *presbyters*, "elders," for nothing! And I ask you to hear this address as an homage of thanks for the liturgical ministry and the wisdom in its exercise in which you are already engaged. And I want to say again that this preparation is at root quite simple, as simple as praying the Lord's Prayer with others: learning the task by heart, imagining again the purpose of the assembly that prays this prayer, and giving access to the prayer to others.

Even more profoundly: the preparation for the assembly is always about your re-immersion in God's grace. The central texts and tasks you learn by heart, if they are truly the central matters, are all gifts from God, gifts that finally hold *you*. And for you to imagine the meaning of the assembly is for you to be invited again to prepare to stand amidst all the others, as a beggar with the beggars, hands out confidently for bread and forgiveness. And then you are invited to give access freely to those things

that you have also freely received. The practices of preparation are practices of grace, not difficult demonstrations of your own mastery.

“Let us pray with confidence in the words our Savior gave us,” calls out the presider to the assembly. What is this “confidence”—even “boldness” as some introductions have it—and how does it relate to the confidence of liturgical leaders? Insofar as it is the stance of the leader, it is not flippancy, not *self*-confidence, not ownership, not supremacy, not even lack of butterflies in the stomach. Rather, it is the upright, open stance of dignity that belongs to one who may speak and enact the truth, God’s truth, about the world and the assembly, the truth of Jesus Christ, the truth of law and gospel. It will be strong leadership, but at the same time, like all religious and ritual power in Christian use, it ought to be strong leadership broken to the service of the gospel amid this people. “Confidence” is the New Testament gift of *parrhesia*: open and bold speech, eschatological free speech, which paradoxically is the very quality of the speech Jesus uses to announce his servanthood, his cross and his mercy. “Confidence,” then, is the leader’s dignified love of the assembly which, in turn, enables the assembly itself to stand in dignity and confidence as the strong sign God’s Spirit is making it. “Confidence” is the assembly itself calling the leader again to the free speech of the gospel. “Confidence” is the Risen One himself, existing here, as assembly. It is the assembly, by the power of the Spirit, standing in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, before the face of God, for the sake of the life of the world.

For discussing these themes and more, and for recovering deep joy in your work, for coming again—by God’s gift—to open confidence in the assembly, I wish you a good institute.