

The Grace of Leading the Assembly

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It is good in nearly every Christian liturgy there comes a moment when all present pray to be forgiven just as they are themselves now offering forgiveness. Thus do assemblies and presiders provide a ground for meeting again next Sunday and giving it another go.

Before speaking of the grace of leading an assembly, let's think about the grace of being an assembly. If in baptism all of us—presiders or not—have been clothed in Christ, become members of that body, and if nothing matters more, then all those baptized who gather, presider included, gather as assembly. The graces and skills of the assembly take precedent over any ministry to the assembly, presider included. Even from a solely pragmatic view, how can we ask someone to preside who does not know how to be one of the assembly? Only citizens may take office.

As we probably all accept, the presider is neither entertainer nor educator nor counselor nor inspirer nor ordained doer of the rites. The entertainer needs an audience, the educator needs students, the counselor needs clients, the inspirer needs fans, the ordained doer of the rites needs the unordained. If we who gather for liturgy fall into any of those descriptions, if we for whatever reason have come merely for instruction or inspiration or education or obligations fulfilled, then we won't be an assembly, and the ones who take on the tasks of presiding have no partner in the assembly. What then are the specific graces of being an assembly? What are the habits that all of us must cultivate? In what manner do we try to shape the children of the community? I will mention three graces or skills of being a member of the assembly that seem particularly crucial is the assembly if to do its part.

Getting It in Our Bones That What We Do Here We Do as Church

The first grace is this: Getting it in our bones that what we do here we do as church. Who sings? Who dines? Who attends to scripture and ponders it in preaching? Who intercedes? Who gives God thanks? Not me! The church. How in this time and place—with its basic assumptions that we are each of us the ultimate entity—are we to find this grace, this habit of doing and being as a collective, as a community? The natural

thing is to hear the day's scripture and the preacher's homily and think: What does it mean to me? What am I to get out of this? Those are the questions the good consumer asks. But these aren't our questions. The word comes to the church. The church is assembled here to be attentive. The church is to listen, to ponder, to reflect, to respond.

American life teaches us to be individuals who consume. We who assemble on the Lord's Day have been so shaped. No wonder we settle for, and even laud, presiders who become suppliers to our consumers. We who consume whole continents, who are most skilled in accumulation of things and experiences, here in assembly we have to wear, try out, and rehearse another identity, not as the consumer but as the member of a body, the citizen, the protagonist.

This is an immense challenge but to acknowledge it is to make a beginning. Then we can begin to ponder how this habit might take root in us as we make any decisions related to the shape of our rituals. If we expect that little by little we can come to sing and process and listen and acclaim and petition and even keep quiet and still as an assembly, then how do we—who take some responsibility for the preparation of the rites in our community—think about entrance rites, silences, repetition, and so much else? How does the ritual we do Sunday after Sunday come to belong to the assembly so that little by little all, ministers included, will know this? No audience here, no consumers. So that is one grace of the assembly: to have it in our bones that here all that is done is done by us, by the church.

And here is a strange corollary: Done by a church that has me as a member and—strange to say—a church that can't do it without me. We Roman Catholics had a lot of emphasis on the obligation to attend (notice the verb) Mass on Sunday. Obviously today half to three-quarters of Roman Catholics have not made that part of their lives. But the truth seems to be that there is a Sunday obligation: I have to be there, I am obliged to be there because the church is going to do its work, and I am part of that church and I am needed!

Preparing for the Liturgy

A second grace of the assembly: Preparing for the liturgy. Do we expect the preacher to prepare? The choir? Do we expect the choir to have habits of rehearsal, of care for their voices? Do we expect the preacher to have habits of study and reflection and evaluation? So all the more we who are the assembly need habits of preparation. What is expected of us in the Sunday liturgy can't be done cold. There are the

obvious ways: reading and reflecting on and even discussing the Sunday scriptures beforehand (or after as preparation for the next week), praying every night to echo and prepare for Sunday's intercessions, praying every morning to prepare for Sunday's songs of praise, praying daily table prayers to prepare for Sunday's table prayer, and holding some silent time as dear. When Sunday's deeds are odd and unique, they aren't ever going to be our own. We have to train the muscles for this Sunday work, to know singing aloud and Bible reading and interceding and acclamation as part of daily life and prayer. Even more, we have to try out in life the sharing at the table, to get that into our bones, all that bread shared and the cup shared demand. How else can we be the doers of these Sunday deeds? So preparation is another grace of the assembly.

Coming Hungry and Thirsty

A third grace of the assembly: Coming hungry and thirsty. I mean hungry for the assembly itself, for God's word, for the Holy Communion, and thirsty for the intercession and the song and the Holy Communion. That is perhaps part of the preparation habit but needs its own place on the list. Sunday's assembly becomes for many just one more item to calendar. Yet wouldn't we expect that the baptized person, living through the six days of work and activities, six days of doing what one can to model a world redeemed, six days of giving up and giving in, six days of confusion, and six days of television and other screens, wouldn't we expect that the baptized person will hunger and thirst for the assembly on Sunday? The obvious answer: Not unless that baptized person knows that one's baptized self will be fed and refreshed! But that gets the assembly off the hook too easily. Often the challenge is to let the hunger and thirst be felt. Roman Catholics once had to fast from food and drink from midnight if they wished to receive Holy Communion. This had its problems in the focus of the fast, perhaps in the notion that one size fits all, but it did bring one there with a bodily hunger and thirst that we often wrongly put aside today. What today might we begin in ourselves to cultivate so that we might let hunger and thirst be directed toward the assembly and its Sunday deeds? How and from what might we fast? Such a fast would not be primarily penitential but anticipatory, the fasting of excitement that we all get once in a while in our lives.

How and from what? Food is always a good possibility, but there are other elements in our lives that keep us from knowing our hunger. The culture is set on keeping us satiated. What habits might we all cultivate if

we put that aside, turn it off, frightening though it may be, to see what's left? So that's a third grace of the assembly: To come hungry and thirsty.

Now these three (doing all as church, preparation, hunger), and certainly others I haven't worked on yet, are also qualities expected of the one who presides and the one who leads the music and other leaders as well. We expect this simply because all are members of the assembly. Whatever we may now say about specific graces and habits of the presider, they build on these graces and habits of the assembly. And that's hard because these foundational notions have a kind of non-professional bias. If one is being paid to be there, how does that professional come hungry and thirsty, come prepared not just by rehearsal and study but by daily habits that tone the muscles used at liturgy? How does that one get beyond the back-and-forth of leader and assembly to know the real conversation here is between the church and God, or better (in Aidan Kavanagh's image) between God and the world, the world here present in this assembly? If I am being paid to be there—and what's even harder—being paid to do this more than once on a Sunday, what will it take to keep the foundation under the structure? Keep that in mind as we look at some notions that may be more specific to the presider.

What I have tried to name above and in what follows are virtues, that is, habits: the habits of the heart of the assembly and of the presider and perhaps others such as the leader of music. Virtues seldom come naturally. They are the result of consciously chosen disciplines that then become the shape of our lives, become part of who we are. Aidan Kavanagh notes that no one should be seen to do in liturgy what they do not do day by day in life. That is important. We are fairly well accustomed by now to separating the art from the artist. It is okay to love Wagner's music and Picasso's sculptures and Eric Gill's work with typefaces and design, even knowing what we know about the persons who did the work. Presiders should not ask us for a similar separation. In real life, of course, it is more often the opposite case: a good and decent person is a terrible presider. We can say that not everyone has the art, and of those who do, not all have been challenged to develop it. We have usually settled for too little. How can we draw from a good person good presiding? *Ex opere operato* has its advantages. Roman or Lutheran, we will never be able to do without it, but that does not excuse us any longer from exploring the needed virtues and doing what we can to inculcate them precisely as ways of life as well as liturgy.

Two cautions before trying to talk about the presider's good habits. First, there are many ways to be a good presider, and there are many very

different human beings who can do this job well. That takes nothing away from the rigor demanded of anyone who would be good, nor does it reduce this important matter to *de gustibus*. What is good and what is harmful here are to be disputed and clarified. This is especially urgent in the Roman Catholic Church but may have other applications. Older members have experienced a time when an adequate presider was one who did all and only what was in the book in the book's order, and a good presider was one who might be thought to be holy. But now for almost four decades older and younger have experienced a more chaotic time, a time when the old discipline is gone but not replaced, and presiders came to believe they have to fill the vacuum with their personalities. Again, what is good and what is harmful must be discussed and disputed.

And the second caution is from Hemingway's observation: "In truly good writing no matter how many times you read it you do not know how it is done." That is more than saying there are many styles of good writing. It is a caution. You can observe how a good writer constructs sentences, but beware of believing you'll then have any clue at all as to why it is good writing. Try it with presiding. In truly good presiding no matter how many times you observe it, you do not know how it is done. Yes, we can here try to play Strunk and White and enumerate the virtues practiced by a competent presider, but in the end we don't know how it is done. That's probably why we dwell so much on what is wrong: "Too many adjectives!" to the writer, and "Too rushed!" to the presider. And that helps. But may we stay aware of the mystery. Hemingway, after saying "no matter how many times you read it you do not know how it is done," says: "That is because there is a mystery in all great writing and that mystery does not dissect out." Ditto. There is mystery in this craft of presiding. Here, then, are five ever-so-cautious suggestions for a presider's virtues-to-be-sought-after list.

Do Not Steal

One: Do not steal. Theft, it seems to me, is the primary vice of presiders. They are forever stealing that which belongs to the assembly, namely, the liturgy. Because few assemblies have had enough experience of full, conscious, and active participation by all the baptized, they do not, of course, know they are being robbed. Seldom does the cry "Stop, thief!" ring out from our churches on Sunday morning, though in truth it would be a better acclamation than "Amen" in many places. A friend who read this liked my image of thief as the great temptation of presiders. His own

image had been the presider as a black hole, a dense entity that sucks everything into itself.

First a Roman Catholic example, then the reasoning. The eucharistic prayer concludes. Whose decision is it as to whether the Lord's Prayer is sung or recited, as to whether people take the *orans* posture or join hands or do nothing at all? In most places, this is entirely up to the presider and even though that person may not be the same every Sunday, the assembly expects nothing except somehow to be signaled whether to sing or speak, whether to do anything with its hands. If there is to be liturgy, there must be ritual. Ritual is not ritual until and unless we know it by heart (with all the possibilities and all the risks). Ritual is that which has no audience, though it has many roles for different persons. This has been the vision of the liturgical renewal. This is the full, conscious, and active participation of paragraph 14 of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. We cannot argue about its validity, only about how to achieve it. The vision is an assembly engaged, working. For that to happen the ritual books of our churches have been refashioned once or twice, risking the momentarily unfamiliar to achieve those structures that can truly belong to the assembly, engaging us in doing our liturgy by heart Sunday by Sunday by Sunday. The lines of the ritual are there, waiting to take on life in each assembly's Sunday-after-Sunday liturgy.

Mechanical enacting of the rite is easier. Playing to the audience is easier. Clericalism is easier. Performance is easier. All those lesser goods named above—education, inspiration, therapy—are easier. Presider as a good and likeable or even holy person is easier. But all these are the ways week by week the liturgy is stolen from the people. It isn't usually a conscious act of theft; it is just doing what comes naturally. The thief and victim are often equally ignorant that a crime has taken place. Presiders and musicians do what they do with great good will or with thoughtlessness, but the effect is the same: They take the liturgy to themselves and put an end to the ritual.

There's often an unarticulated model inside the thief/presider or thief/musician: I am the source of all things. I give of myself. I make it happen. Even, I empower. The liturgy, *c'est moi!* The cure for this may be harsh: One to three years in the assembly. The alternative is not presider-as-cipher. Let the individual presider's or musician's genius and energy go into those aspects of the liturgy where they are needed (but often sadly neglected). This is not just preaching, but such matters as the choice and preparation of texts, the slow learning of the disciplines of pace and rhythm.

Congregations are served well when those chosen for the care of the Sunday liturgy work hard for several years to achieve the way each rite—gathering, word, eucharistic praying and Holy Communion, dismissal—is carried out by the assembly, and each moment within each rite. The search is for what is strong enough to bear the weight of repetition, strong enough and also beautiful enough.¹ The search is not for novelty. The ritual, once achieved, will surprise us with how it can enfold anything at all that the lives of the congregation and the larger world hold up. But the ritual is not displaced by this; it is a home. This is the discipline of poetry: rhyme or rhythm is not the enemy of creativity; it is its best shot at life.

Does the discipline of the ritual, the discipline of the presider who does not steal, mean a mechanical uniformity from Sunday to Sunday? I think instead it means a freedom where the larger rhythms of the ritual can work on all of us—the seasons and the feasts, the lectionary, the up and down, life and death of the community itself, the daily news. This happens once it is our ritual, ritual that needs us, the assembly.

Here are a few small examples of what one might call petty thievery. The assembly keeps silence after the first reading from scripture. One kind of thievery that can happen here: the musician does not. The musician is turning pages, giving signs, moving about. Another kind of thievery: the length of the silence is twenty seconds one Sunday, a minute the next, practically non-existent the third. And all with the same presider and same musician. The result is no real silence at all. We're just out there waiting for it to end because we have no rhythm, no ritual, nothing that is ours. So even the adequate silence is wasted.

Another form of petty thievery is the program. This comes in the pre-fab form often used in Roman Catholic parishes, the so-called missalette. And it comes in the locally produced form, often looking suspiciously like a concert program. Sometimes we need these things, but depending on when and how we use them, they can convey that what happens here has been well planned and will be enacted for our edification, with or without our participation. Certainly there has to be preparation and choices. But what these are and how they are conveyed can easily be subtle theft of the liturgy.

A third form of petty thievery is interjections. The liturgy has a place for exhortations—What else is “Lift up your hearts”?—and it has a place

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¹See *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* (Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1978).

it do? It says my voice counts. I can speak in a normal voice and my voice reaches to all the corners of the room. That's the problem. The people of the assembly need to hear each other, and need their ears to tell them that we're all here and we're all in this. But why lift up your voice to answer a person who speaks to you over an amplifier? Give the assembly a presider who has to lift up the voice to be heard in the corners, and the assembly will lift up their voices to respond. We'll not do away with amplification, but be aware of how it affects presiding.

Be part of the assembly. This can be especially difficult for the music leader and for others who help with music, instrumentalists especially, but even a choir can seem to constitute itself as something other than assembly by attitudes and postures. There is often the sense that the music people are on when they're on, and when they're not, they aren't there—sometimes in body, often in spirit.

All of this about being an assembly member first is not to "give a good example." Not at all. Instead, let some in the assembly give you an example, humble you perhaps by their involvement and attention. All this is to try to get things straight.

Be Careful of Words

Four: Be careful of words. The poet Anne Sexton said:

Be careful of words,
even the miraculous ones.
For the miraculous we do our best,
sometimes they swarm like insects
and leave not a sting but a kiss.
They can be as good as fingers.
They can be as trusty as the rock
you stick your bottom on.
But they can be both daisies and bruises.³

Here are the words you may be dealing with by yourself as a presider in just a single Sunday liturgy: the call to worship, greeting, opening collect, perhaps the reading of the gospel, perhaps the homily, the prayer concluding the intercessions, the prayer concluding the preparation rite, the eucharistic prayer, the invitation to Holy Communion, the prayer after communion, and the blessing. That's a lot. So the deacon, if there is a

³Anne Sexton, "Words" in *The Awful Rowing toward God* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 71.

deacon, ought to handle the invitations and exhortations. Let someone else handle announcements.

Presiders need to know how words used over and over—say those of a greeting or a eucharistic prayer—are to be handled. With that mastered, they need to give priority every week to the words of collects and prefaces and other texts that change week by week. When there are choices, these need to be made early so that the chosen text may become familiar.

A presider needs to keep working at the rhetorical skills lifelong. And this is not something done alone. Everyone needs to find those whose honest critique will help. The rhetoric of the presider is not the rhetoric of the politician or the announcer. When words are to be heard over and over, how are they best voiced? Why do nearly all tribes chant these words? Doesn't chant take the individual's gifts out of them? What then does it bring? Why is it better (or is it?) than spoken recitation? What qualities does this chanting suggest for the collects and eucharistic prayer? Does it mean the words disappear, or is it possible that they are enhanced, honored? What does the chant allow between those who are engaged in this prayer, the presider and the assembly? And should one unable to chant ever be presiding anyway? We need to know what the use is of something done over and over. Here is Abraham Heschel:

What ... makes it possible for us to pray is our ability to affiliate our own minds with the pattern of fixed texts, to unlock our hearts to the words, and to surrender to their meanings. The words stand before us as living entities full of spiritual power, of a power which often surpasses the grasp of our minds. The words are often the givers, and we the recipients.⁴

Where choice among texts is involved or the composing of texts for use in the liturgy, the presider first needs a good ear. If you don't have this yet, find someone who does. Not all texts are equal, and not all texts that look good on paper sound good in the church.

Whatever is happening to the word in the larger society, those who gather on Sunday must honor speech and there rehearse lives where speech is honored and honorable. We proclaim over and over "in the beginning was the Word ... and the Word became flesh" (John 1:1, 14). Know that any of us who intend to keep the ways of Christian liturgy will be ever involved in the art of words well composed and well spoken. This won't happen if all we take in week by week are the words of media, journalism, and advertising. We need some silence, and we need some regular practice

⁴Quoted in Gabe Huck, *A Sourcebook about Liturgy* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994), 105.

of reading those “miraculous” words, the words of the Bible as well as of the poets, novelists, and essayists who have and do make language both beautiful and authoritative.

All that is said of the words of prayers in the liturgy holds for the words we sing and to the selection of those words. The liturgy gives primacy to acclamations and litanies, and to psalms and the refrains of psalms, but there are times we sing hymns and mantras and these words must have the same scrutiny we would give prayer texts. In preparation for any Sunday, all of these words—scripture, eucharistic prayers, songs, collects—are part of the whole the homilist needs in seeking what and how to preach (and not only the words but the processions, gestures, songs, the whole ensemble of liturgy).

Sometimes, Don't Preside

Five: Sometimes, don't preside. Sometimes, be in the assembly. Maybe that can happen only when away from home, but even that is good. This is not so much to observe or even to learn something from another presider, though that may happen. It is to exercise the role of every baptized person, to stand in the shoes we all wear, ordained or not. Such exercise is needed because the ordained sometimes forget how the shoes feel, and how they work.

Let me mention three things to look for as a member of an assembly on Sunday. First, consider the rhythm of the liturgy. Observe when there is such a flow and when there is not. You will sometimes see an assembly where the ministers seem well-prepared, the words well-chosen, and the music well sung. But has the assembly done this liturgy? Think about the rhythm and about how the assembly moved into and through and out of the liturgy.

Second, try to learn about passion, how it sounds in the words of presider, how it looks on the face and in the gestures of a presider. How does it differ from enthusiasm or cheerfulness? There is a quality that does not end in focusing attention on the presider but in lifting up the assembly. That's what I am calling passion. You could perhaps go a lifetime through our society and our churches and see very little of it.

Third, study the back and forth of energy between the presider and the assembly. Sometimes there isn't any. But an assembly doing its work drives the liturgy forward and energizes the presider. A presider who has the flow and sense of the liturgy deep in the muscles and bones is free to give the assembly care and respect and love but first to give these in every

moment of the liturgy itself. Strong, loving, and wise—so the scriptures describe our presider (and so was titled Bob Hovda’s book, still the best thing written about presiding).

Finally, become, in the words of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, “fully imbued with the spirit and power of the liturgy.” In paragraph 14 that is the condition without which the whole renewal falls apart: “... fully imbued with the spirit and the power of the liturgy.”⁵ Not enamored of liturgy’s potential for beauty, not taken up with liturgy’s potential to teach, not caught up in an aesthetic that yearns to be shared—no—but slowly, steadily being grasped by the liturgy, by what our assemblies do in Eucharist, in baptism, and in seeing members through life and death, by the banging of scripture against life and of tunes against seasons, and by the power of all this to remake us, the world.

⁵*The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, II.14 in *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, new rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 8.