

What Gets Changed? Sam Gets Changed?

Gabe Huck

Most of what I learn about ritual and liturgy and church I learn from places that aren't about ritual and liturgy and church—novels and poems and music and dance—and from people who don't know the jargon but often know the Lord and the church. The title of this presentation comes from one such fellow named Sam. He is a member of St. Henry Church on the southwest side of Cleveland. You'll see a little of that church later on in this hour. We were there last fall, some of us from LTP, to make a video about the communion rite at Sunday mass. We had been looking for some parish where they really did the rite, and here we found one. So on one weekend we shot the video at their church and the producer interviewed a dozen or so parishioners and the clergy.

Sam is a parishioner there, a middle-aged African American about whom I know little else. Eileen asked questions about the parish, about the different ministries, about how they felt about Sunday eucharist at St. Henry's, about communion bread and the cup, and about the way people understand what takes place. Thus she asked about the eucharistic prayer and the communion rite, about the bread and wine: "Sam, what is it that gets changed when everyone prays that prayer and takes holy communion?" He just looked back at her and said, "What gets changed? *Sam* gets changed!"

I have forgotten almost all of the little I ever knew of St. Thomas Aquinas, but wasn't there something he called *res tantum*—and it was the end of the sacrament, the thing only, the thing itself, the real *reality*. I'd like to think that's what Sam hit on: "What gets changed? *Sam* gets changed." There is theology being done! There is mystagogia being done. There is a Christian who has no need to be taught about *lex orandi, lex credendi*. That has been the amazing experience of visiting these parishes and taking with people.

But why is this clarity about the role that liturgy is to have in the church's life so rare? Why couldn't we have walked across the street and made the video at the nearest church? Why are we making videos at all—fish don't need videos about how to swim. Why do we need videos about how Christians do liturgy, that is, how it looks when people really do their liturgy? Believe me, I would rather not. I don't like any camera at work while people do liturgy (and, even apart from liturgy, people who use cameras to record an event tend to miss the event themselves and perhaps cause others to miss it also). Liturgy isn't watched. But I put that aside, a bit, because people need to see, even on a screen, what people just like themselves can do and what they can say about what they do; then some lights might go on.

Why so rare? Realize that I speak as a Roman Catholic, and my experience is in that community. I'm delighted to be invited today to do some of the practical—but being here also makes me aware of differences in our experiences, especially practical, that may not be helpful. Thirty years ago the liturgical renewal reached a point where it was embraced by the Roman Catholic institution and formalized in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. These are likely familiar words, but try to hear them again. They set down the core of that document and of the renewal:

The church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations called for by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" is their right and duty by reason of their baptism. In the reform and promotion of the liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else. For it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.

Take it all in. Take in that it speaks of "*all* the faithful" and of "*all* the people." It speaks of a participation that is "full, conscious, and active": a strong order. What does that look like? And why should it be so? Not because of authority saying so, not because it was once so in the far past, but it should be so because that is the nature of this thing we call liturgy. If you don't have this, you don't have liturgy. When has an institution ever been so critical of hundreds of years of its own practice? Here is such a simple recognition: Liturgy is ritual. Ritual isn't watched. Ritual isn't consumed. Ritual is something you do. It's a dangerous thing because it is such a powerful thing—food and sleep would be two other good human things with their dangerous sides. But we should not miss this fundamental acknowledgment: Liturgy demands participation because of its nature, because of what it is. You can't go back on that.

The *Constitution* maintains that such participation is not a luxury, not something nice when you can get it, but is rather a "right" and a "duty." We have a right to it. And we have an obligation to so participate. Both the right and the duty come from the same font, the baptismal font: "by reason of their baptism." That is an amazing line for an age when baptism for Roman Catholics was a quiet secret more about original sin than anything else. This approach to the assembly as *the* doer of liturgy is set forth with a fine strength and clarity in the third part of *The Graceful Use of the Means of Grace*.

Having said that and being aware of the state of things, what next? So, they wrote, this reform of the liturgy has this goal above all others: "this full and active participation by all the people." The next words are, I believe, crucial. "For it," that is, this full and active participation by all the people, that's the "it" here, "it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit."

Where then do you become a Christian? Where do you come back to be a Christian again? Where do you hold onto being a Christian week in and week out? Doing your liturgy. Being the church as the church does its liturgy. Does this claim something grand for the liturgy? Not at all. When push comes to shove, no God is going to count the number or kind of liturgies we did. All that the bishops of the Roman church maintained here is that most of us plodding, baptized people won't ever be able to wear our baptismal robes home, to work, and to the public forum unless Sunday by Sunday we can put on, discover, and exercise our baptism around a book and a table. Here is the "primary and indispensable source" of the true Christian spirit." "Primary" and "indispensable" are no mean words.

But this is about what happened and why we are where we are now. And the next sentence in the *Constitution* is on target, or so we can believe now. "Yet it would be futile to entertain any hopes of realizing this unless, in the first place, the pastors themselves become thoroughly imbued with the spirit and power of the liturgy and make themselves its teachers. A prime need, therefore, is that attention be directed, first of all, to the liturgical formation of the clergy." It appears they were right. And it then appears how far they were from taking that to heart. It would not have been easy. It would have been very long. Little bold was done. The doing of these three decades can justly be criticized for all sorts of failings, then, and it is no wonder that some would blame what they take to be the liturgical reform for undermining the stability and the comfort they now seem to remember finding in their church.

We are, I hope, our own worst critics. We who believe what that document says about liturgy and participation, about baptism and rights and duties, about what is the source of the Christian spirit—we know how much we have failed. And so we resolve to learn and to build, to educate, and most of all ourselves to become persons who live from our own full and conscious and active participation in a church doing its liturgy. We resolve—among other things—to discover our *need* for the ritual, our hunger for it. We have ourselves far too often been satisfied to live from a consumer approach to liturgy to buy a little inspiration. We just thought we were selling a better brand. We can't hit this hard enough. We have to reconceive what leadership is. Perhaps now we are ready to let the full impact of the task strike us, and perhaps we are ready to see some possible ways to move toward the sort of vision embraced in those words from the *Constitution*.

To me, it is imperative that we quit fumbling around and begin, at least in a few places, making liturgy the ritual of the people. That is how we must understand our hope. Against that we must constantly check ourselves and our rhetoric and our practice. I'm not so sure that can happen everywhere. I think that the difficulties posed by the culture are immense, especially as they affect time and relationships and simply the whole way we are given to understand ourselves from what has become the prime

giver: the television in its self and in its content. People cannot long be at peace with being given one identity by the culture and another by the church. And too often the church is afraid to press its identity, to demand any discipline at all for it.

I find myself thinking and advocating this: That we imagine the Sunday liturgy which would be done by our baptized assembly when the members of that assembly would come to know in their muscles and their bones, in their heart and soul, the rhythms and the movements, the sounds and the gestures and postures, the flow and the order, the ins and outs, the highs and lows, and the louds and quietes of what they do as church on Sunday. I believe that we should practice imagining this, that we think and talk it through, that we have an image of where we are going, and then that we go there. I know there is no foolproof process for doing that. We can only name some possible components. Here are three.

First, leadership—leadership for the long haul. A parish that lives from its liturgy is not done in a year. It is not done as one priority fighting with others. That's the easy part. The hard part is that leaders must be convinced that people who live from the liturgy will be people who will evangelize by their lives, who will feed the hungry and comfort the sick and be present in the forum when decisions need to be made. If you believe that, then you can let go of any guilt for working so hard and so long on the assembly's worship.

Those whose part of the leadership is to preside at liturgy for an assembly week after week must cultivate that art (Robert Hovda's *Strong, Loving and Wise* is probably still the best book on this). You must discover what it is to serve an assembly doing its liturgy and what it is to steal back that liturgy, to blatantly or subtly take it to yourself, make it depend on you, control it. The *Constitution* said it simply that the pastors themselves must become thoroughly imbued with the spirit of the liturgy. What is it to be imbued? Read Hovda on that. At the least, say that it is someone for whom ritual expression is constant and natural, someone who is finding it almost natural to think in terms of the church—and not I—as the subject of all the verbs about the eucharist: sings, listens, gives thanks and praise, eats and drinks, shares the peace, and on and on. To be imbued is to live from the liturgy, to hunger and thirst for it, and to draw one's nourishment from all its expressions in time and space.

This leadership is not shy about leading, but it knows the difference between liturgy done by the church and the attempt at liturgy done for and to the church by the leader! There is much at stake here, and it isn't an easy matter. This is that discipline of the liturgy Carl Schalk spoke of yesterday. Those who would be strong, loving, and wise will be persons with a great deal of confidence and a certainty of their limits. They will ask for and listen to criticism of their presiding. They will be persons familiar with the elements of public ritual of the Lord's Day because they know well the variety of the less public rituals that mark every day. They will be persons,

women or men, acutely aware of the language we have used and its biases and so will be searching for a language that breaks through to the breadth of God's names and ours too that are rooted in our sacred scriptures. This is a vital concern, far beyond the occasional "mother" word or image. I strongly suggest reading *She Who Is* by Elizabeth Johnson. Yet when we search for this language, we should do so without ideosyncracies. We should do it with the quality and repeated ability of ritual. Loving the church—and even more loving the world—with a sense of serving both by a deep respect for living symbols through which we mark our days and lives—that's a minimum job description for a presider.

Second, leadership is exercised in good catechesis about liturgy. I have the impression that in the vast majority of churches, it is unheard that the deeds of the church should be mentioned in the homily. Yet it is in our tradition that the words and gestures and the things themselves—oil, bread, wine, table, lectionary—are the stuff of homilizing. This is not explanation; it is not emptying the symbol by telling what it means. (We have all learned at least the theory here: we never can say what the symbol means; the symbol, however, can and will say what we mean if we allow it to.) No, the preaching does not beat meaning out of symbols, but it allows the preacher and the assembly together to ponder what they do, to turn over and around this and that moment, to unfold the mysteries in such a way that they are revealed precisely as mysteries. This sort of preaching—and its counterparts in parish bulletins and adult education session—marvels and asks questions. It lets the symbols into our lives and our lives into the symbols. Such preaching and teaching recognizes that first and last, symbols must speak for themselves—and precisely because of this, this preaching is in fact creating a respect and a silence so that our symbols can speak and be heard.

The effort to catechize begins by recognizing the hard go we have, being so full of our individuality and so lacking in our community, and being so accustomed to being done to and for and so unaccustomed to communal doing. It recognizes that week in and week out, the church has to be proclaimed—Christ, head, and member—proclaimed not for its own boasting, because we have nothing to boast, but proclaimed so that we recover the fundamental and awesome difference it makes to act as if that holy communion were true, were the deepest truth about ourselves.

This preaching does not hesitate to ponder the season of Lent, to turn over and over the greeting of peace, to draw us into reflecting on a single word, phrase, refrain, or hymn text that is part of our ritual vocabulary. This seems to me rare. The day's scriptures will be attended to by the preacher with some care. But preaching is also—and often at the same time—drawing on any of the elements of our ritual. This sort of mystagogia, this unfolding of the mysteries, is not adult education. It is a public and poetic pondering, challenging, freely drawing on the life of the community and the world or else it has no ground to stand on. But it knows

that life so well! This preaching is convinced, from the personal experience of the preacher, that each of us lifelong learning to put on Christ and lifelong rehearsing at liturgy for the ways, we shall be in all our life and the tasks we shall do in the world. We are always just learning to love as God loves it and us too.

In the making of the two videos I mentioned, we spoke with people who had been for several years living with such preaching, living with such catechesis in various forms. They agreed to sit and be interviewed. What they say witnesses not only to the strength of the liturgy they do Sunday by Sunday, but also to the building of a vocabulary so that they can understand and think about this liturgy. That thought, it seems to me, is never like an outside critic's evaluation and is never cut off from the dawning wholeness of the speaker's life, the integrity of ritual and life. Without the words, we not only have nothing to say, we have nothing to ponder. True preaching, constantly drawing us through our liturgy to our lives, is in part the sharing of a vocabulary and so the sharing of the language a people has to have in common in order to be a people. This is not to argue that every baptized person should speak the jargon of liturgists, but rather that it is everyone's right to name and so be able to know the deeds that are ours to do on Sunday. Listen for that in the video excerpts.

Third, knowing that the formation of such leadership and of a Sunday liturgy that is clearly the work of the assembly takes time, one begins somewhere. Not everywhere, but somewhere. By that, I mean that we do not make all of the adjustments that are needed in a moment, but slowly and with catechesis and listening and a sense for the length of time it takes to try something on. For example, leadership might consider making the preparation of gifts and table a priority over a given period of several months—or until there is satisfaction that we now have this element such that it is the work of the assembly. How is this preparation rite to be done? It is a fairly unstructured moment, with much left to the individual assembly. There are important and practical tasks to be accomplished: the collection of gifts for the poor and the church, the bringing of bread and of wine and of vessels, and the preparation of the table. It is a time without much use for spoken words, but with a need to pull back from the intensity of the intercession that concluded the liturgy of the Word and to turn with some deliberation and some beauty to the intensity of the eucharistic prayer.

It is the task of leadership to say: We need to do this better. We need to ponder these moments, evaluate what we do now, and move toward a practice that can sustain us, that is clearly the assembly's, that works! (There is nothing wrong with demanding that something works, as long as you know that *works* is always in terms of the playfulness and impracticality of all ritual activity.) To be all those things, this practice has got to be that, got to be ritual, got to be repeatable week after week and rich enough so that one comes eager and needing to do it again and again and again.

It seems to me that leadership gives thorough attention to this moment, ponders both what is done and what is meant, and evolves a direction for the parish that is then shared in catechesis and in preaching before and as the new shape is tried on. The delicate balance here is this: We are not about reinventing liturgy, nor are we slavish to any golden age. We are about understanding our ritual deeds and allowing them to be done in that full, conscious, and active participation. We are about a liturgy that belongs to the assembly, but to an assembly that is part of a larger communion.

Insofar as the shape of a rite such as the preparation of the table involves some members of the assembly rendering service to the whole assembly, those persons—acolytes, musicians, and ushers—are prepared for their service. This preparation has first to do with the actual things done: timing and movements. But even in this it has to do with searching for that service that needs to call no attention to itself, but which is fully in tune with the moment and the assembly. This preparation is about an ensemble, about ministers who know they don't act in a vacuum but with others. Finally, like all ritual, it is about a correspondence of the whole person and the deed. How does one pass the basket? How does one bring forward bread and wine? How does one spread the table?

Recently I have seen three parishes who habitually do this preparation well but in quite different ways. Two of those are seen on the videos. Let me briefly describe them, because I think in all three this simple preparatory rite is now done so that it truly prepares not only the table but the assembly to stand at that table.

At St. Peter's parish in downtown Cleveland, the assembly sits (the seating is choir-style, two sides facing each other) after the intercessions and, in quiet, ushers pass the baskets. When this is completed, the presider, who had been sitting in the midst of the assembly, stands and goes to the table at the far end of the room. Two parishioners with great reverence and dignity carry the vessels of wine and bread to the table. The three of them bow deeply, and the two persons carrying vessels place these on the table. An acolyte brings incense to the presider, who then without haste honors the table and the gifts with the fragrance and smoke of the burning incense, goes to so honor the assembly. All stand as the presider passes slowly through their midst with the incense. All then follow the presider back to the table, surround it, and stand ready to begin their eucharistic prayer.

At St. Henry, a few miles away on the southeast side of Cleveland, the seating is in the traditional pews facing forward. After the intercessions, acolytes with bowls of smoking incense lead the presider to the back of the assembly and up the aisle. The acolytes stop at the head of the aisle, allowing presider and other ministers to pass between them. The presider extends a hand to draw incense to himself, bows to the altar table, places his own gift in a basket, and then moves on. Other ministers and the whole assembly come in procession in the same way, from the back pews to the

front, each passing through the incense and most signing themselves in its fragrance, each bowing to the table, each placing envelope or cash or groceries in the baskets. Or perhaps they bring nothing but themselves and give that self in their deep bow. The choir, and the assembly with them, sing through this rather leisurely time. The last to come are those bringing the bread and wine; they are led to the table by the incense bearers and place the gifts on the table. The eucharistic prayer then begins.

At St. Nicholas parish in Evanston, Illinois, all are seated after the intercessions. Presider and acolytes then rise and come forward, and at the head of the assembly, meet those who are bringing forward bread and wine and empty baskets. As they stand together, the presider invites all to pray that all the kinds of gifts given here and throughout the week may with the bread and wine be acceptable to God, and all respond as usual. The ushers then pass the baskets as the gift bearers go to the altar table and place there the bread and wine. The presider then sits down to await the end of the collection. The rite concludes with a brief prayer spoken by the sitting presider, the prayer over the gifts. The "Amen" marks the end of this time. The presider stands and goes to the table at the principal Mass, accompanied by all who wish from the assembly, who surround the table. The first words at the table are then the dialogue that begins the eucharistic prayer.

These are not major matters perhaps, but in each case a rite that is often watched, endured, indifferent a rite that is often blurred into the eucharistic prayer, begins to belong to the assembly—not simply because it is done with care, with reverence, with time enough, but because it is done in the same manner each week so that people know it. By it they prepare themselves for what they must do next—the eucharistic prayer and the communion. The great danger is stealing it, destroying it as ritual. Gibson says this won't be a love song till we know the words by heart. (Thus we take care advocating multiplicity of eucharistic prayers as the "grace" document does.)

What a parish must do, I believe, is slowly look at each ritual element of the Sunday liturgy, work with the elements one at a time, do the needed catechesis, prepare the ministers to minister, take care to evaluate, but know that things need a while to settle in. What we have seen—at St. Peter's and St. Henry's—is people who know their rites and whose lives are being shaped by those rites. This is how Christians are made, when their rites are theirs and they train the muscles that week in and out do whatever lives shaped by scripture in community have to do. What we have also, though, is this: No one can do in the assembly what they do not do apart from the assembly. Presider, ministers, leader, all: the deeds done here have to be echoed. Do we listen to scripture here? Not unless and until we listen to scripture elsewhere. Do we reflect here in silence? Do we sing? Do we give thanks? Do we stop over the goodness of table set with bread and wine and surrounded by brothers and sisters? Only when that kind of stuff is the stuff of our lives will we get it.