

LITURGY IN AUSTRALIA

Ten 'Observations' on Australian Liturgy - Rome 1998

In November 1998 a group of Australian bishops met with members of the Roman Curia to discuss a number of areas of Australian Church life. Among the conclusions from this meeting were some observations about liturgy — paragraphs 37 to 46 of the document issued at the end of the meeting. These observations are reprinted here in bold type.

After each of these observations from the meeting in Rome there are comments and questions prepared by the Australian National Liturgical Commission.

The Commission makes this material available to foster reflection and discussion about our celebration of the liturgy in parishes throughout Australia. It would be suitable for use at clergy gatherings or at meetings of diocesan liturgy commissions.

1. Gains and Future Prospects

The work of renewal of the Church in Australia has made progress largely by means of the renewal of the liturgy and the people's fuller participation in liturgical celebration.

In Australia, as elsewhere, experience bears out the Holy Father's observation that the vast majority of "the pastors and the Christian people have accepted the liturgical reform in a spirit of obedience and indeed joyful fervour. For this we should give thanks to God for that passage of the Holy Spirit through the Church which the liturgical renewal has been" (Apostolic Letter, *Vigésimus Quintus Annus*, 12).

It is a pressing need that these positive results be built upon. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has already planned to set aside significant resources to produce educational materials on the Mass which can be used at a diocesan or parish level. Other concrete initiatives will also be devised to ensure the quality and authentic fidelity of liturgical celebration and sacramental practice as the third Christian millennium dawns.

COMMENTS

This is a positive section emphasising that liturgical renewal has been a significant vehicle of Church renewal since the Second Vatican Council. In Australia the liturgical reform has generally been accepted and implemented in a spirit of obedience and with appreciation for the benefits of the reform. This sets the context for discussing any difficulties and weaknesses.

Significant resources have recently been set aside at the national level to produce educational materials on the Mass for use at local level. This raises the question of how these resources can best be used in promoting that full participation in the liturgy that the Council desired.

QUESTIONS

What has been your experience of the liturgical reform following Vatican II?

What kind of materials would be useful in helping people understand the Mass better and taking part more fruitfully?

2. The True Meaning of the Sacred Liturgy

It is important that the sacred liturgy as a whole be appreciated in all its profundity and mystery. The liturgy is more than a recollection of past events, a means of imparting knowledge or a vehicle for expressing the faith and life of the celebrating community. It is fundamentally the manifestation of God's initiative and his loving will to save, expressed in the Paschal Mystery of our Lord Jesus Christ, made present and efficacious by the Holy Spirit. In the liturgy, Christ's work is carried forward by the Church until the end of time.

The Council spoke therefore of the liturgy as the summit or highpoint toward which the activity of the Church tends and the fountainhead from which all her strength flows (Constitution, Sacrosanctum Concilium, 10; Apostolic Letter, Dies Domini, 32). By their participation in the earthly liturgy all the faithful are formed in right conduct and prepared for that liturgy in the heavenly city to which we journey as pilgrims (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 8; Dies Domini, 37).

COMMENTS

The Liturgy is not a mere recollection of past events. In the liturgy Christ's work is carried forward until the end of time.

A solid fundamental sacramental theology and eschatology is needed so that liturgy is not perceived as mere technique or rubrics. While all the Church's strength flows from authentic liturgy, the converse is also true—that many of the Church's weaknesses flow from poor celebration.

In Australia, there is a particular challenge to maintain a sense of the sacred and of mystery in our celebration of the liturgy. While an over-formal style can easily be perceived as false and pompous, we probably err on the other side. Many priests seem to think that the Mass is an informal and chatty exercise. They speak off the cuff and frequently in the course of the liturgy, whereas interventions should be well-prepared, concise and should recognise the reverence of the moment.

Many people also seem to believe that a measure of the liturgy's success is the number of times that the congregation can be moved to laughter. Some priests routinely have a joke prepared for each Sunday. Others make the Mass an occasion for advancing the cause of their chosen football team. Mass should certainly not be wooden or stilted and the occasional snatch of humour is in order, but the dignity and reverence of the celebration should be paramount.

There is a need to stress Christ's presence among us in its various forms. At the celebration of the Mass, which perpetuates the sacrifice of Christ, "Christ is really present in the assembly gathered in his name; he is present in the person of the minister, in his word, and indeed substantially and permanently under the eucharistic elements". (General Instruction of the Roman Missal 2000, 27; see also Constitution, Sacrosanctum Concilium, 7)

Our worship spaces need to be designed to reflect this truth. The arrangements for the celebration should avoid having an excessive distance between clergy and laity.

A good homily will be another opportunity to lead people into the awesome realities being celebrated and to appreciate the presence of Christ in the liturgy.

QUESTIONS

How can we better express our reverence for the sacred mysteries we celebrate?

What are some practical ways in which we could improve our celebrations and help people understand the liturgy more deeply?

3. The Liturgy: Act of Christ and of His Church

The celebration of the liturgy is therefore never a private action of the celebrant or of the community gathered in a particular place, but an act of the Church as such (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 26), in intimate union with Christ her Head. Accordingly, an insistence on “good liturgy” is right and useful as long as the expression is not misunderstood as meaning a human virtuoso, external performance or “choreography”. Rather, all participants should accommodate and subordinate themselves and their manner of thinking, acting and speaking to the great gift and mystery of God’s redemption and to the person of Christ, our sole Saviour, with a special reverence for the real presence of Christ in the holy Eucharist at the Mass and reserved in the tabernacle.

COMMENTS

The Church’s liturgy is never a private action of the celebrant or of the particular community but an act of the whole Church. Therefore serious reflection is called for upon our mode of celebrating each of the sacraments: e.g. baptism and reconciliation should be seen as communal celebrations.

While we should avoid the extreme of treating liturgy as merely an exercise in human virtuosity, external performance or choreography, we should also avoid the other extreme of a wooden rubricism. The liturgy is fundamentally the prayer of the Church, offered in union with Christ.

This section highlights the need for reverence for the Real Presence of Christ when celebrated in the Eucharist and also when reserved in the tabernacle. In some Australian parishes at the moment, this is an area of tension, though the two are not in opposition. Reservation of the Eucharist flows from the celebration of the altar and prayer before the Blessed Sacrament is an extension of the thanksgiving after communion. In turn, devotion to Christ in the reserved sacrament leads back to the sacrifice of the altar and our participation in it through holy communion.

QUESTIONS

How might we foster a stronger sense of community and communal prayer in our celebrations?

How do you see the relationship between Christ’s presence during the celebration of the Eucharist and when the Sacrament is reserved in the tabernacle?

4. The Liturgy: Manifestation of the Nature of the Church

Since it lies at the centre of the Church's life, the liturgy manifests the Church's very nature and directs it consciously and explicitly towards its ultimate goal. The Church is seen most perfectly in the celebration of the Eucharist, presided over by the bishop of the diocese, surrounded by his priests, deacons and the community of the faithful (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 26, 41; Dies Domini 34).

This ideal phenomenon is realised in varying degrees in circumstances where the bishop is not able to be present and where he is represented ordinarily by a priest. Even in such circumstances, the bishop remains the essential point of reference and the celebration necessarily reflects the nature of the Church as a "structured communion whose nature is reflected in an "ordered exercise of liturgical action" (On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests 6:1-2; Sacrosanctum Concilium 26; Lumen Gentium 10-11).

It is when each takes part in the liturgy according to his or her specific role in the Body of Christ that the whole Body is built up most effectively.

COMMENTS

Every liturgical act is an ecclesial act. Liturgical celebrations in the absence of a priest need to avoid developing a congregationalism.

While priests should be sensitive to the needs of the congregation, authority for priestly leadership does not flow from the congregation but from ordination. The priest receives his delegation from the bishop as the liturgist of the diocese. The present critical climate has undermined some priests' confidence as celebrants and preachers. The presence at the Church's liturgy of people there merely to observe or to critique is an abuse.

The Eucharist of the local Church of the diocese — bishop, priests, and people — is the fullest expression of the nature of Christ's Church. The parish celebration of Eucharist is an extension of the liturgy of the local Church. The parish community is linked with the Church universal through the bishop and its belonging to the local Church. Using the Roman rite is one sign of a sense of Church which is broader than the particular liturgical assembly.

When the nexus between Eucharist and community is broken (as happens when no priest is available on a Sunday) we are left with the troubling question: what kind of Church is evolving?

QUESTIONS

How might we foster a sense of our communion with the Church throughout the world?

Can we find a forum for constructive criticism and fruitful dialogue about how we celebrate the liturgy?

5. Authentic Promotion of the Liturgy

In today's rapidly changing world it is all the more necessary to return constantly to the authentic teaching of the Church on the liturgy, as found in the liturgical texts themselves and, among many other authoritative sources, as reaffirmed and explained in a lucid and accessible manner in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Many people today call for a more "transcendental" liturgy, and indeed liturgical celebrations must be permeated with a proper religious sense born of faith in unseen realities (Dies Domini 43). Care must be given to the beauty and elegance of the vestments, sacred vessels, surroundings, furnishings, and to the eloquence of the words and actions themselves, to factors which will encourage the participation of the faithful, and to catechesis concerning the meaning of the liturgical signs (Sacrosanctum Consilium 11, 14; Inaestimabile Donum 16- 17; Dies Domini 35).

At the same time the liturgy must be a living event accessible to the people. There is a need in catechesis, in all pastoral care and in liturgical celebration itself to involve all Catholics, above all the young, more fully in the liturgy and help them to understand and live out its meaning. The Church in Australia, as in other countries, faces a notable decline in recent years in the numbers of Catholics attending Sunday Mass, a situation which calls for a pastoral response. (Dies Domini 36, 46-49).

COMMENTS

Liturgical formation is a priority. In this the Catechism of the Catholic Church is a rich resource. It reaffirms and explains in a lucid and accessible manner what is found in the liturgical texts themselves and in other authoritative sources.

The desire for a more "transcendental" liturgy is one of the signs of the times to which we need to be responsive. The simple beauty of the Roman liturgical tradition needs to be retrieved. Unfortunately some celebrants lack a sense of the occasion.

The National Liturgical Commission has prepared resources dealing with the appropriateness of vestments, sacred vessels and furnishings. The Pastoral Introduction to the revised Sacramentary, recently approved by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, has highlighted these issues and offers detailed practical guidelines.

Over the past twenty-five years some parishes have resorted to the use of domestic utensils and fairly prosaic vesture and furnishings.

In the long tradition of the Church, appropriate encouragement has been given to artists and artisans to use local material and local mediums, rather than importing liturgical items.

Sacred vessels, vestments and furnishings should be beautiful. However, moderation is also called for. Some of the great bishops and saints of the Church sold costly liturgical items to give the money to the poor!

Liturgy must be a living event, accessible to the people. There is a need to reflect further on liturgical celebrations in particular settings such as schools and for particular age groups such as young people. A Directory for Masses with Youth paralleling the Directory for Masses with Children may be desirable.

In the Bishops' consultation with Youth, liturgy came up strongly as an issue. When bishops conduct parish visitation, a constant concern expressed is worry about "kids not at Mass".

Local guidelines could help to develop a devotional life among young people. When things go wrong or tragedies happen in the school setting, devotions such as the Rosary can provide a structure for communal prayer and lament.

In recent years there has been a notable decline in the number of Catholics attending Sunday Mass. This calls for a pastoral response, including efforts to foster good liturgy, good preaching, good music, a prayerful environment and a sense of a welcoming community.

QUESTIONS

What might we do to make our celebrations more welcoming, especially for people who are not frequent churchgoers?

How might we foster a sense of God's presence in our celebrations?

6. Weaknesses and Correctives

A weakness in parish liturgical celebrations in Australia is the tendency on the part of some priests and parishes to make their own changes to liturgical texts and structures, whether by omissions, by additions or by substitutions, occasionally even in central texts such as the Eucharistic Prayer. Practices foreign to the tradition of the Roman Rite are not to be introduced on the private initiative of priests, who are ministers and servants, rather than masters of the sacred rites (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 22:3; Inaestimabile Donum, 5). Any unauthorised changes, while perhaps well-intentioned, are nevertheless seriously misguided. The bishops of Australia, then, will continue to put their energy above all into education, while correcting these abuses individually. Such education and corrective action are also the effective means for the pastoral care of those at the parish level who criticise and report the efforts of others, sometimes justly, but sometimes in a judgmental, selective, ill-informed and unproductive manner.

A return to a real sense of the Church and of liturgy is the most effective path to overcoming obstinacy in personal tastes and to setting aside arbitrary action, fault-finding, conflict and division. Both in regard to the liturgy and other questions in the life of the Church, there is a need for fidelity to the mind of the Church and willingness to dialogue with others, above all the pastors and bishops.

COMMENTS

In dealing with poor liturgical practices, the best general response on the part of bishops is promoting appropriate liturgical education, while also correcting particular abuses individually.

As well as those listed, other poor practices could be noted, such as:

- homilies that do not appreciate the Word of God
- disregarding opportunities provided by the Directory for Masses with Children
- concentrating on the singing of hymns rather than the singing of acclamations and responses from the liturgy itself
- regularly using hosts from the tabernacle instead of consecrating sufficient hosts for the community present
- not making the chalice available to the congregation
- priests making choices of Mass texts to suit their personal piety rather than the liturgical norms and the needs of the particular communities
- the use of unauthorised Creeds in the Mass
- the omission of certain elements such as the Gloria, the Creed, the washing of the hands, the Lamb of God
- non-liturgical greetings
- the lack of proper vestments
- using secular or popular music with superficial, sentimental words at weddings and funerals
- replacing the funeral homily with extended eulogy

There is a need to retrieve the real sense of liturgy building up faith communities and achieving a unity and bond of love.

QUESTIONS

How might we grow in a true sense of the liturgy, for example, through learning more about the history of the liturgy, and through a reflection on our experience of liturgy?

How might we address problems regarding liturgy in a way that preserves respect for one another, including a respect for priests and bishops?

7. Liturgical Translations

For authenticity in the liturgy, it is essential that the translation of the text not be so much a work of “creativity” as of a faithful and exact vernacular rendering of the original text, which itself is the fruit of the liturgical renewal and draws upon centuries of cultural and ecclesial experience.

While fully respecting the genius of each language and avoiding a rigid literalism, an appropriate translation also carefully avoids paraphrase, gloss or interpretation. The explanation of the riches contained within the liturgical texts is the concern not of liturgical translation, but of the homily and of sustained catechesis.

The substantial unity of the Roman Rite is an expression of the theological realities of communion and of ecclesial unity and contributes to the rich plurality of the Church. Within their respective historical and cultural contexts, of course, the same may be said for the other Catholic liturgical families of venerable antiquity.

To this end, the practice of the recognition of the Holy See as desired by the Second Vatican Council (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 36; Instruction Inter Oecumenici 20-3 1; Code of Canon Law, 838) stands as a guarantee of the authenticity of the translations and their fidelity to the original texts. By means of this practice, a concrete sign of the bond of communion between the successor of Peter and the successors of the other Apostles, translations become truly the expression in the local Churches of the heritage of the universal Church. The Holy See may not divest itself of this responsibility, and the bishops, who bear the responsibility of overseeing and approving the translations, likewise regard their own role as a direct and solemn trust. In this delicate work, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference will continue to cooperate in English-language questions in so far as possible with other English-speaking episcopal conferences.

COMMENTS

This section recognises and respects the genius of each language and the need to avoid a rigid literalism in translating from Latin into English and other languages. At the same time, it emphasises the importance of preserving the “substantial unity of the Roman Rite”. The statement refers to the particular responsibilities of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the Holy See in regard to translations.

A practical problem now exists of the unavailability of many of our approved liturgical books. In the absence of these, parishes often use shabby books or even have to resort to photocopied texts. It is not uncommon for parishes to import liturgical books, approved in other English-speaking countries, including the Canadian New Revised Standard Version Lectionary. Confusion arises with such a variety of liturgical books in Australian churches. This problem highlights the importance of a speedy recognition by the Holy See of the Revised Sacramentary and the need for a decision regarding the proposed Lectionary based on the New Revised Standard Version.

QUESTIONS

Do people find the language used in the liturgy easy to understand? Inspiring?

What features would you like to see in future editions of the Sacramentary and Lectionary?

8. The Sense of Sin

Many bishops in Australia and elsewhere have noted a decline in the sense of sin, stemming from the deeper reality of a crisis of faith, and having grave repercussions for the sacrament of penance. The situation calls for a renewed and energetic catechesis on the very nature of sin as opposed to salvation, and thus for a focus in sacramental praxis not only on the consolation and encouragement of the faithful, but also on instilling a true sense of contrition, of authentic sorrow for their own sins.

Catholics should come to understand more deeply Jesus' death as a redeeming sacrifice and an act of perfect worship of the Father effecting the remission of sins. A failure to appreciate this supreme grace would undermine the whole of Christian life. They should be made fully aware, too, of the indispensable role in the reconciliation of sinners which Christ has entrusted to his Church.

COMMENTS

The Statement points to a crisis of faith which can only be addressed by a profound personal spiritual renewal.

In the Australian context our Catholic tradition provides a language and rituals that could help us deal with some issues that require conversion on a national level, such as Aboriginal reconciliation and improving our care for the environment.

There is a need to develop a moral theology which is fundamentally founded, pastoral in its approach and practical and accessible in its dealing with particular issues, including issues relating to sexuality.

What does a "sense of sin" mean? An excessive individualism and affluence have made "salvation" seem unnecessary until the bottom falls out of one's world!

Yet there are signs in our society that there is some sense of sinfulness: the national celebrations of Sorry Days, the efforts among Christians to achieve ecumenical reconciliation, the fact that hundreds of people do come with a deep sense of seriousness and commitment to communal rites of Reconciliation.

The Church is calling for a renewed catechesis about personal sinfulness. It is also calling for a renewal of individual confession. It could be that the fall off in individual confession is connected with the lack of such catechesis, the inappropriateness of old confession timetables for modern life and a projection of guilt from the personal to the social levels.

If we can focus on the right questions in these areas and identify and name accurately what is happening, this will help in finding solutions that will benefit the Church and the wider Australian society.

QUESTIONS

In what ways do we need reconciliation today?

What does our Catholic liturgical tradition teach us about reconciliation?

9. The Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation

Individual confession and absolution remains the "sole ordinary means by which one of the faithful who is conscious of grave sin is reconciled with God and with the Church" (Code of Canon Law, 960; Ordo Paenitentiae, 31; Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1484). Energetic efforts are to be made to avoid any risk that this traditional practice of the sacrament of penance fall into disuse.

The communal celebration of penance with individual confession and absolution should be encouraged especially in Advent and Lent, but it can not be allowed to prevent regular, ready access to the traditional form for all who desire it.

Unfortunately, communal celebrations have not infrequently occasioned an illegitimate use of general absolution. This illegitimate use, like other abuses in the administration of the sacrament of penance, is to be eliminated.

The teaching of the Church is reflected in precise terms in the requirements of the Code of Canon Law (especially 959-964). In particular it is clear that "a sufficient necessity is not... considered to exist when confessors cannot be available merely because of a great gathering of penitents, such as can occur on some major feast day or pilgrimage" (Code of Canon Law, 961, 1).

The bishops will exercise renewed vigilance on these matters for the future, aware that departures from authentic tradition do great wrong to the Church and to individual Catholics.

COMMENTS

While individual confession and absolution remains "the sole ordinary means by which one of the faithful who is conscious of grave sin is reconciled with God and with the Church", the lived reality for many faithful Catholics is that truly grave sin might not be a frequent occurrence.

Good catechesis and moral theological reflection is needed around this issue. Catechesis on sin and reconciliation has been inadequate in recent decades. There is also need for catechesis about the history of the sacrament of Penance.

It is also possible that we have tried to telescope too much into this one Sacrament of Reconciliation! Reconciliation is also achieved through Eucharist and Anointing. Participation in the Eucharist is the ordinary means of reconciliation and forgiveness for the 'daily sins' of the Christian life. Lesser sins are forgiven by prayer, acts of fasting and good works. There may exist some sense that the Sacrament of Reconciliation has been trivialised by merely devotional or compulsive confessions.

There is a need to provide times and places for the appropriate celebration of the First Rite. This is sometimes lacking. In some places the First Rite of Reconciliation either might be offered infrequently or might not be celebrated well. There might be no sharing of Scripture and prayer. The celebration might be rushed. The revised ritual forms might not be taken seriously. Good faithful Catholics find this less than satisfying. Where the First Rite is celebrated well it can be a rich and fruitful opportunity for personal reflection and spiritual direction.

In regard to the use of the Third Rite, the document states that "the teaching of the Church is reflected in precise terms". The mind of the Roman authorities is clear: the conditions for celebrating the Third Rite of Reconciliation are to be interpreted strictly. The need remains for a pastoral response to the question of how reconciliation might best be celebrated. How may a communal Second Rite of Reconciliation be practically celebrated given the declining number of priests, particularly in those parts of Australia where there are large distances between parishes?

Because the Second Rite is difficult to celebrate well, more pastorally responsive solutions need to be considered. For example, there might be a period of retreat and recollection, beginning with a celebration of the Word and an examination of conscience, followed by an extended period of quiet prayer and reflection, when there would be the opportunity for those participating to seek spiritual direction or to confess their sins and receive individual absolution. Such a gathering could conclude with Mass using a Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation.

There are tensions in the Church regarding the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. On this issue, as on others, reconciliation is needed within our Catholic community!

QUESTIONS

Have you found some celebrations of reconciliation particularly helpful?

How might we develop rituals of reconciliation that respond directly to the needs people feel today?

10. Appropriate Liturgical Formation

So that the faithful may be sure to receive from their priests an authentic and informed ministry and teaching, insistence will continue to be placed upon the stipulation of the Council's constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium, 16, that the sacred liturgy be regarded as one of the principal subjects in major seminaries, a requirement that is the subject of further guidelines offered by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education's Instruction In Ecclesiasticam (3 June 1979).

Such liturgical formation needs to be followed through in all the different sections of the Catholic community and at the various levels in a consistent and permanent fashion. Only in this way will communities and individuals be brought to a deeper understanding of the liturgy. Likewise, only by sustained programs of this kind can the Church in Australia be assured of a sufficient pool of resource persons to sustain the different areas of liturgical development.

COMMENTS

This is a positive and forward-looking conclusion to the whole section on liturgy.

Training in the Church's liturgical tradition and in other theological disciplines is necessary in order to develop good liturgical attitudes in priests and those preparing for the priesthood. Moreover, such training is an important means of remedying liturgical abuses.

The Catholic universities have been encouraged to focus more on liturgical preparation of teachers.

The various theological institutes across the country could be encouraged to specialise in certain areas of liturgy, such as fundamental sacramental and liturgical theology, particular liturgical celebrations, Church music.

The "Certificate of Pastoral Liturgy" offered through the Catholic Institute of Sydney is an important initiative. It is highly desirable that more people be trained in liturgy within Australia.

Given the recent closure of some formation centres there may be resource personnel available from religious congregations to undertake specific tasks. Such people should not be lost or under-utilised.

National scholarships for liturgy studies could be offered as happens in the area of social justice. This could help assure a "sufficient pool of resource persons to sustain the different areas of liturgical development".

The publication of a new edition of the Sacramentary will give us an opportunity to take a fresh look at our celebration of the Mass. It will provide an occasion for education about various aspects of liturgy, such as the elements of the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the roles of the assembly and of particular ministries in the celebration

QUESTIONS

Have you attended any liturgy training programs? If so, what elements did you find most useful?

What kinds of liturgical formation would be suitable for parishioners as a whole?