MINISTRY OF PRIEST CELEBRANT

“Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.”

(1 Corinthians 4:1)

There are many different gifts, but it is always the same Spirit.
There are many different ways of serving, but always the same Lord.

(1 Corinthians 12: 4-5)

MINISTRY OF PRESIDING

The Church Prays in Christ

When the church gathers to pray, the one Christ is present in many modes, in word and sacrament, in priest and people. The whole body of Christ is united in offering worship in spirit and in truth.

“The liturgy, then, is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ . . . In it, complete and definitive public worship is performed by the mystical body of Jesus Christ, that is by the Head and his members.”  [Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (1963) 7]

The Priest Engages the People in the Prayer of Christ

The role of the priest is to lead the community in prayer to the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit. His goal is to enable the full, conscious and active participation of all.

“Pastors must therefore realise that when the liturgy is celebrated something more is required than the mere observance of the laws governing valid and lawful celebration; it is also their duty to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects.”  [CSL 11]

“Hence in arranging the celebration of the Mass, the Priest should be attentive rather to the common spiritual good of the People of God than to his own inclinations.”  [General Instruction of the Roman Missal 352]

The Priest Presides in his Humanity

Effective presiding depends on the priest’s capacity to be fully present in his humanity. He neither denies the gifts with which he is blessed, nor draws attention to them, but lets them bear the grace of God for all.

“Priests, while being chosen from the midst of humanity and appointed to act on its behalf in what pertains God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins (see Heb 5:1), live with the rest of humanity as with brothers and sisters.”  [Decree on the Life and Ministry of Priests (1965) 3]

“Therefore, when he celebrates the Eucharist, he must serve God and the people with dignity and humility, and by his bearing and the way he says the divine words he must convey to the faithful the living presence of Christ.”  [GIRM 93]
To Preside is to Serve

Presiding faithfully over the church’s prayer is a service to both God and the community. It is a ministry of hospitality in the spirit of the gospel.

“No other single factor affects the liturgy as much as the attitude, style, and bearing of the celebrant: his sincere faith and warmth as he welcomes the worshipping community; his human naturalness combined with dignity and seriousness as he breaks the Bread of Word and Eucharist.”


The Art of Presiding is Gift and Task

Presiding well is both gift and task. It is an art that combines the personal qualities of the priest with the practical skills that he can and should work to acquire.

PERSONAL QUALITIES

Faith

The priest celebrant is first and foremost a believer with believers. He listens attentively to the word of God that is addressed to him as it is to all, and he leads the prayer of the community with heartfelt faith.

Humility

Good presiders are humble – that is, they are well grounded in themselves. They are free to put their whole self at the service of others without becoming the focus of attention themselves.

Presence

The ministry of presiding is a ministry of presence. Presiders who have the capacity to be fully present to God and to themselves are more able to be present to the community.

Sense of Call

Presiding at prayer is one of many services which the priest is called to offer. The stronger his sense of being called to a life of service, the more effective will be his presiding.

Natural Talent

Presiding is an art that presumes and builds on natural gifts such as the ability to communicate and to lead.

Spirit of Collaboration

Presiding is a uniquely important ministry among many others exercised in the liturgy of the church. The priest celebrant ensures that all these ministries are fully implemented and coordinated.
Willingness to learn

Good presiders are committed to performing their ministry to the best of their ability. They are always willing to seek feedback and learn from others as to how they could preside better.

PRACTICAL SKILLS

As well as developing his personal qualities, the presider can attend to a number of basic tasks and acquire a range of practical skills for his ministry.

“One who presides must therefore acquire the ability to engage in the liturgical gestures and speak the ritual words in such a way that these actions and words will lead the assembly to experience an ever-greater identity with its one Lord as his living Body. This is a very different agenda from simply mouthing the words and getting through the actions because the rubrics prescribe them.” [Leading the Prayer of God’s People (1991) 8]

Knowing the Community

His first task is to get to know the community he is serving. Who are they and what are their stories? What are their hopes and their needs?

Knowing the Rites

A second task is to become familiar with the church’s rites. How are they shaped? What is their purpose? What are their texts, their symbols, their gestures? What legitimate adaptations are provided for? Nothing substitutes for an attentive reading of the liturgical books, including their pastoral introductions.

Knowing the Languages

The priest celebrant needs to be at ease with the many languages of liturgy, verbal and non-verbal.

Verbal Communication

- The presider’s grasp of the various forms of verbal communication in the liturgy is critical. In addition to making himself clearly heard and understood, he must respect the nature of each mode of communication in the liturgy – greetings, addresses, prayers, invitations, proclamations, blessings, intercessions, and so on – and express them accordingly.

- This implies a clear understanding of which texts are to be voiced by the whole congregation together with the presiding celebrant, which are for the presider alone, and which are for the congregation alone. The presider also needs to be clear as to which texts are to be sung and which are to be spoken.

- Effective verbal communication presumes that the presider has identified and rehearsed the texts (and melodies) he is to use, and has ensured that all the books to be used are marked in the right place.
Silence

The presider needs especially to understand and respect the language of silence. All worship has a dynamic for which periods of silence are essential. The leadership of the presider is crucial in ensuring these are times of fruitful prayer not of empty waiting.

Non-Verbal Communication

Much communication in liturgy is non-verbal. The presider needs to be familiar and comfortable with the language of:

- space: to ensure that the liturgical environment forms a gracious place that enables God’s people to worship well together
- symbol: since the power of sacrament is rooted in the natural meaning of earthly things such as bread, wine, water, oil, light and table
- time: so as to be attentive to the many rhythms at play in every act of worship, from its own particular tempo to the daily, weekly and annual cycles of the liturgy
- music: so that music in its multiple forms is fully and wisely used in the liturgy to inspire the prayer of the whole assembly
- body: so that his own gestures, postures and movements – and those of all liturgical ministers – will be hospitable, reverent, and faith-filled.

“The gestures of the presider, sparing and authentic, welling up from a profound sense of the celebration, will speak far more eloquently of the symbolism which is the life of liturgy than a spate of words or an interminable commentary. The beauty and noble simplicity of environment, artefacts, vesture, and above all the elements necessary for the sacraments, will evoke far more effectively the mystery being celebrated than a surfeit of explanations which are just a doomed effort to cover up for miserably inadequate signs.” [LPGP 8]

Good presiders know how and when to make eye contact in order to engage the congregation; they also know where to direct their gaze when addressing prayer to God.

“Symbolic presence is a way of being which is rooted in each one being genuine, true to himself. This is totally consonant with a deep sense of seriousness about serious things. Perhaps the fusion of these elements is best expressed by the way in which one looks at people . . . All the ministers in the liturgy, when they understand and experience themselves as ministers, will look at their brothers and sisters in the assembly with a gaze which ‘reflects the countenance of Christ, which is the glory of God.’” [LPGP 8-9]

A Felt Unity

A key component of the priest celebrant’s leadership is to ensure that the liturgy being celebrated is experienced as a unified whole. By being attentive to its inner rhythm and by overseeing the role of other liturgical ministers he is able to “choreograph” the whole action and maintain “liturgical flow”.

Adaptability

The more familiar the presider is with the shape and spirit of each rite, the more he will be able to adapt appropriately to particular or unexpected circumstances.
A FINAL WORD

“. . . we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” (2 Cor 4:7)

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE


Scripture texts from NRSV; Vatican II quotes from the Abbott edition; GIRM from The Roman Missal.