

LITURGICAL FORMATION

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Just over a week ago (5 - 7 September, 1986) we Roman Catholics held our second Annual National Liturgy Conference. The theme was "Liturgical Formation". Almost from the first moment, the word 'formation' was challenged. What did it mean? Why not 'education'? Was it not simply modern jargon? I didn't join in the argument, but it has been running round in my mind ever since. And I have come to the conclusion that I prefer 'formation'.

I know that 'education', rightly understood, means something like a thoroughgoing preparation of the whole person for living. But, for me, it still has a ring of the formal, of learning in an academic situation. I know that's really not fair, but I can't help it. Formation, to my way of thinking, is more to do with attitudes, a state of mind. And that accords more easily with what I believe is liturgical worship.

I suppose I am to some extent influenced by meeting, in my own Church, liturgically well-educated people, experts in the origins of our liturgy, full of amusing historical anecdotes and who look on liturgical celebration as some kind of living museum. And there is the scholar-priest who will criticize the direction of modern liturgy, but who celebrates the Eucharist privately and without a congregation.

I am Director of Liturgical Formation for England and Wales. I didn't invent the title: it was given to me. What I think it means is that I try to help people understand the liturgy and have their lives shaped by a liturgical spirituality. Which is not to say that I consider liturgy to be the sole Christian influence, or the only spirituality. Yet it is the central one. Helping people see that is what my job is all about.

In the Roman Catholic Church, liturgical formation became a priority in the wake of Vatican II. The same is probably true of other churches which have undergone some form of liturgical renewal. Long-standing assumptions were rudely challenged. It was not sufficient to say, "This is the new form of

the mass, ordered by the Pope, and we will implement it from next Sunday with our customary obedience".

The Council itself warned that something more was required than simply adhering to rules and regulations, to rubrically correct ways of celebrating. Rather, liturgical renewal, to have any claim to being genuine, must be a renewal of spirit, of understanding, of prayer. The Council therefore laid down guidelines for the training of clergy, the setting up of liturgical commissions and the founding of liturgical institutes.

As the liturgical changes filtered through to the parishes, it quickly became clear that, given the chance, the people in the pew wanted to know what the changes were all about and why they were taking place. Such explanations did not necessarily bring about instant, eager acceptance of change, but at least people were given a reason for them.

This brings me to a first working principle in liturgical formation, and it is an obvious one, but not, apparently, to everybody. It is this: liturgy changes because the Church changes, and the Church changes partly because its members, society are changing. Therefore liturgical formation has become a priority because the old authoritarian structures are crumbling and, in addition, people increasingly demand to know the why and the wherefore of that which affects their lives.

My second working principle is this: the focus of liturgical formation has, and will continue, to change. At the beginning of the post-Vatican II renewal, history was the key. A single talk to a parish group about the Eucharist down the ages was like blowing away a mist. Not infrequently I have been asked, "Why weren't we told all this before?" The historical approach also opened a door to the realisation that change was, is, and always will be, part of the Church's life.

The historical focus quite quickly developed into the theological. The question now was: what is the liturgy all about? More difficult than the historical approach, the results are just as gratifying. It is still a joy, no matter how often I do it, to take a group of people on a voyage of discovery through a eucharistic prayer. That there is structure at all has not occurred to many. I am sure this opened another door, a door to prayer.

Several theological themes stand out as priorities at this stage: the place of Christ in the liturgy; its Trinitarian structure; the Paschal Mystery; the Bible and its meaning; the tension of Word and Sacrament; the meaning and power of signs and symbols; the nature of Church and community. That

is not an exhaustive list, but, I think, the basics.

The third focus of liturgical formation is now developing rapidly. It is the focus on ministry. The comparatively recent introduction of lay readers

into Roman Catholic liturgy, the growing number of lay ministers of Communion, and new attitudes generated by the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults are together changing the relationship between clergy and laity, and laity themselves. In the process, the ministerial movement is changing the face of the liturgy.

I see the changing foci of liturgical formation not as a succession of distinct and separate stages, but as overlapping and with all three continually in play. Furthermore, different communities, different parts of the country, are at different stages. There is no single answer for all at the same time.

History, theory and theology are all very well. They have to be put into action, they must be celebrated. Therefore liturgical formation must necessarily include advice about the actual style and form of celebration. That demands knowledge of the parts of the liturgy - what they mean, how they interrelate. Unfortunately too many people still are too concerned with the how of the liturgy and not enough with the why.

In the understanding of liturgy and its good celebration music plays an all-important role. It is a make-or-break element. Roman Catholic liturgical music in Britain has been plagued by the second and third rate. Where, however, there is good liturgical music there grows a better understanding of what liturgy is for. The same can be said of the artistic and architectural environment of the liturgy. Surroundings which are both congenial and correct make for good liturgy.

At whom is our liturgical formation aimed? Firstly, the laity. (I will return to the clergy in a moment.) Until quite recently it was not considered necessary to in-form the non-ordained. Now they are our primary objective. It is clear, too, that is what the laity expect. The previous lack of formation has given rise to a demand for help. The involvement of lay men and women in liturgical ministry and as resource people for celebration has created further need for training.

Whatever understanding and competence the laity may acquire, it will be of little use if celebrants, presiders, clergy are themselves unformed. Sacramental theology and liturgical law have been a staple diet of Roman Catholic ordinand training. Liturgical theology and practical skills have not. The first course in liturgy ever to be given in a Roman Catholic seminary

in Britain was introduced in 1964. Most priests now engaged in pastoral work were ordained before that year.

Courses for priests, voluntary as well as "three-line whip", have featured in many dioceses over the past twenty years. There is still much to be done. The overall standard of celebration is not high, and with most of the rites now revised it is difficult to awaken interest. Two areas cry out for further formation: first, a proper understanding of the centrality of liturgy in the life of the Church. The fact that it is the summit and source of all Christian activity is not widely enough appreciated. Second, there is a simple lack of communication skills, speaking, preaching, movement, gesture, silence, the use of signs and symbols.

Today the seminaries include in their syllabus full courses in liturgy. The effect of these may be seen around the country. Too often, vocation to the ordained ministry appears to be regarded in too personalistic a manner. That the priest also is a member of the worshipping community and is not outside it is sometimes forgotten. For a few, the powers given in ordination seem to dispense from the need to be attentive to the liturgical needs of the community.

How is liturgical formation to be carried out? The diocesan bishop is the high priest of the diocese. He is therefore the primary teacher. To assist him, all dioceses ought to have a liturgy commission, though a few do not, and some that exist are not very effective. Formation work is also done by other Church educational agencies, and not a few parishes have conducted their own programmes.

To help the dioceses with advice, resources, workshops and the like, there is the National Liturgy Office set up by the Bishops' Conference and responsible to it. Our aim is not to provide a single centre as the fount of all liturgical wisdom, but it is to enable each diocese to identify its needs, discover local resources and devise plans of formation. I am convinced there is far more local talent than most people realise.

What I would like to see in each diocese is a liturgical centre. Based on an active parish, such a centre would be a source of information, a location for courses and place of liturgical excellence. So far, such centres exist in varying degrees of development in four dioceses, the most notable being that founded by Harold Winstone at Manor House, London.

The possibility of a National Liturgy Institute has been mooted for years and is under active consideration. Views differ as to its function and style. A year-long residential course has been suggested. But today,

economic restraints and the existence of a highly successful institute in Ireland seem to me to rule that out. We should seek elsewhere. But seek we must. Our leaders need training.

In conclusion, two cautionary thoughts. First, much of our liturgical formation is middle-class. We are learning, at times quite painfully, not to be dazzled by the enthusiasm and response of those who have the background and experience which makes them easy "targets" for lectures and workshops. They make up a minority of our worshipping communities, and a majority at courses and conferences. So what of the others, the silent majority ?

The second cautionary thought. The best method of liturgical formation is the liturgy itself. The very nature of the assembled community, the reality of Christ present in its midst, the power of the Spirit in word, sign and symbol are formative in the fullest manner possible. Good, prayerful celebration does more to form men and women into true worshippers in spirit and in truth than any number of courses, commissions, institutes and directors of formation.

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LITURGICAL FORMATION IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

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I suppose that if you write a book entitled "Liturgy Pastoral and Parochial", you are fair game when it comes to being asked to speak on this remarkably elusive subject, "Liturgical Formation in the Local Church". I have great sympathy with Bryan Spinks who wrote recently to the Bishop of Winchester - and his letter has been circularised as a Liturgical Commission paper -