

What Is Liturgy?

by Linda Gaupin, CDP

Liturgy is the word commonly used to describe the public worship of the Church. It is our prayer as the Body of Christ. It is the outstanding means whereby the faithful “can express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* 2). Thus the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that the liturgy “makes the Church present and manifests her as the visible sign of the communion in Christ between God and men” (CCC 1071).

The Church has a vast treasury of liturgical prayer: the celebration of the Eucharist and the sacraments, celebrations of the Word, blessings, the Liturgy of the Hours, and the various ritual celebrations associated with the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. One of the principal tasks of catechesis is forming children, youth, and adults into the liturgical life of the Church.

Liturgical prayer is primarily ritual activity. It uses ritual language to speak about, proclaim, and make real the great mysteries of our faith.

Liturgy uses the language of ritual structure, symbol, gesture, word, and time to signify and proclaim the mysteries of our faith.

After Vatican Council II all of our liturgical rites were revised to include introductory rites, a Liturgy of the Word, a sacramental or liturgical action, and concluding rites.

The introductory rites help us take on the form of a community, give us a common identity and purpose, and prepare us to listen to God’s Word. In the Liturgy of the Word we enter into an unending dialogue between God and a covenant people where the community of faith listens to God speaking to them. Through our active participation in the sacramental action we encounter the saving mystery that is celebrated. And in the concluding rites we are sent forth to go out and live what we have just prayed, thereby assenting to the great unity between liturgy and life. Our full, conscious, and active participation throughout this basic ritual structure continuously forms and shapes us as a people.

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The primary symbols and gestures of liturgy also both form and transform us, the people of God. We are people of the *assembly* who *gather* to form the one Body of Christ. We are people of the *light* who proclaim our belief in “Christ, the light of the world” and *pass* this light on to others. We are people of the *cross* who, *marked* with this sign, live out this mystery in our daily lives.

We are people of the *water*, *immersed* forever into the Paschal mystery. We are people of the *oil*, *anointed* as Christ-figures in this world. We are people who have been *claimed by Christ and continue to be reconciled* and made one with him in the *laying on of hands*. We are people of the *white garment* who have *put on Christ*. And we are

people of the *bread and wine*, *nourished* on the Body and Blood of Christ, who are *sent forth* to be a eucharistic people in the world. These symbols and gestures continually appear throughout our many liturgical celebrations. Our full, conscious, and active participation in these symbols and gestures never ceases to form and transform us as the people of God and followers of Christ.

Thus, liturgy is considered the most powerful formative experience of Church. Both the General Directory for Catechesis (1998) and the U.S. National Directory for Catechesis (2005) call knowledge and participation in liturgy and sacraments one of the most important tasks of catechesis. (See *GDC* 87 and *NDC* 20).



For Reflection



What have you learned from this article about the powerful role liturgy plays in the spiritual formation of a Christian?