

On the Importance of Liturgy in Youth Ministry

*“Your prayer should be liturgical.
How I would like to see you using
the psalms and prayers from the missal
rather than private prayers of your own choice.”
- St. Josemaria Escriva, The Way, 86*



St. Josemaria Escriva offers Holy Mass.

In order to understand the importance of liturgy in youth ministry, we must first understand what is liturgy. Liturgy (*leitourgeia* in Greek) means the public work of worshiping the Lord. To worship the Lord is never an individualistic activity. It always involves the community. Yet while worship *involves* the community, it is not the *work* of the community; rather, it is the work of God – or *opus Dei*, to channel St. Benedict and his Rule – in that it is something that, paradoxically, the Lord does for His people. Liturgy is received as gift rather than created, and to receive the liturgy as gift requires man to open his heart with proper disposition. Since the Lord gives us the liturgy, this relieves us of the burden of having to craft it ourselves; there is no need for innovations or self-expressions in liturgical rubrics and texts, and, indeed, these edits would indicate ingratitude toward the Lord for His gift. Instead it is the responsibility of man to receive the Lord’s gift of liturgy and to return it to Him as beautifully and perfectly as possible, for, as it was put once, “If you abuse God’s liturgy, God will abuse you.” Just ask Nadab and Abihu, who, before the Lord destroyed them for offering an offensive sacrifice, were sons of the high priest Aaron (Lev 10:1).

Yes, there it is: ‘Sacred liturgy should be as beautiful and as perfect as possible.’ It is a gift that should be treated as one would treat any precious gift given to him by his spouse. A visitor once asked St. John Vianney, pastor at Ars, France, why his Mass vestments – chasuble, stole, alb, etc. – were of such beautiful quality while his own daily cassock was frayed and dirty. He replied, “The cassock is for me. The vestments are for God.” Understanding what is liturgy is the answer to the age-old question: ‘Why does the Church have all these shiny, expensive things when there are so many hungry and poor?’ God deserves our best, and God knows that we better be sure that the rest goes to the poor. “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (Jn 12:8).

In fact there is a relationship here. The sacred liturgy, especially the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, is “the high point of our life and the source of all authentic Christian spirit” (Msgr. James Moroney, 2011). Sacred liturgy is the fuel for our work, by whatever name you prefer to call it: evangelization, apostolate, discipleship, outreach, ministry, catechesis, etc. The Work of God is the source of the work of man. The Mass, according to Msgr. Reynold Hillenbrand, is the source of the “corporate oneness” that is taken from Mass into the streets: “This oneness must be brought to our homes...to our political life...to our social life...to our economic life...into working life...to our international life.” The monsignor argues, “The liturgy is the indispensable basis of Christian social regeneration.” In other words, this is not ‘Benedict XVI vs. Francis’; rather, it is a perfectly continuous both-and. Sacred liturgy rightly orders us, and by rightly ordering us it rightly orders our families and our society *through* us – that is, using us as vessels. While the high point of our day is Mass, the rest of our day is an extension of the Sacred Mysteries to the extent that we serve our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now perhaps we better understand sacred liturgy and how it touches every aspect of the integrated Christian life. From this it simply follows that liturgy is important for youth ministry, just as it is important for any and all ministries. It is the *source* of ministry. As youth ministers, we must be immersed in the liturgy, especially the Mass, in order to receive the strength and firm purpose to assist our charges in developing a relationship with the Lord. Our own relationship with the Lord is primary: “We must first *be* evangelized and then in turn evangelize” writes our own Bishop Ricken’s USCCB Evangelization and Catechesis Committee, or to put it mediievally, *Nemo dat quod non habet* – You can’t give what you don’t have.



Bishop David Ricken celebrates a Confirmation liturgy at St. Francis Xavier Cathedral, Green Bay, Wisconsin.

So as you acquaint your young flock with liturgy, be sure to steep yourself in it, especially Holy Mass, which is offered *every* day of the week; the other sacraments, especially Confession; and the Liturgy of the Hours, which is the extension of Mass that sanctifies our days and nights. Get yourself a Daily Missal and learn the theology of the Mass so that you can teach it to your class. Pick up a copy of *Christian Prayer* – also known as the breviary, the Divine Office, or the Liturgy of the Hours – and try praying Morning and Evening Prayer. How beautiful it would be to end your Wednesday class with Night Prayer, knowing that you are praying with the Church around the world!

You will find that liturgical prayer will order your life, for it gives a pattern and a meaning to your days. From a seminarian’s perspective, the liturgy is very close to the meaning of life. The theology, holiness, and order of the liturgy dovetail with the offices of the priest: in union with the Bishop, to teach, sanctify, and govern. When a priest grows old, and he cannot be a pastor any longer, or run his apostolates, or meet with his committees, or visit the homebound because *he* is homebound, or visit the bedridden because *he* is bedridden, he still can – indeed, he must – pray the sacred liturgy and celebrate the sacraments, even if on a hospital tray. This same is true for families and individuals. Even if nothing else has gone right all day – at work, at home, at school – the family can come together at the end of the day and pray. Liturgical prayer can become an anchor for busy families. And for individuals seeking to dedicate their lives to the Lord, liturgy unites their prayer and work to that of the Church. All of us may end up like that bedridden priest. How great it would be to offer to God the prayer of the Church until we take our dying breath!

Young people are thirsty for order and beauty and, generally speaking, the transcendent. They are thirsty for something that is challenging yet consistent. Why not slake their thirst by introducing them to liturgy that is all of these things? How excellent it is to teach young people how to pray, to help them develop a relationship with the Lord! If there are budding religious vocations among your young people, these vocations will only grow stronger as the young pray with the Church. While not every youth night may feel transcendent (at least to those who are yoked with planning and executing it each week), sacred liturgy holds the promise of a very direct experience of the Divine Father.

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