

The Problem, and Some Solutions

Most good liturgy committees can be vastly different in how they operate, while the bad ones all seem to be bad in the same ways. (Our apologies to Tolstoy for mangling his great opening.)

Regional differences and oddball uniqueness seem to have disappeared when it comes to liturgy committees, just as they have in many other parts of American life. In big parishes and small, rural and urban, active and inactive, the liturgy committee meeting for some reason is a headquarters for sublimated hostility, inaction, and sheer boredom. For anyone who's wound up attending a liturgy committee meeting they'd like to forget, the following all-too-true examples will sound familiar.

- A meeting to “plan Advent and Christmas” becomes an extended debate on Christmas decorations. Did we have enough trees last year? Can't we light the manger scene outside? Who'll hang the wreaths? Elapsed time: 1 hr. 45 min. Actual progress: 0.
- A meeting to evaluate the year's progress suddenly becomes an evaluation of the schedule. Can we move the 10:15 to 10:30 so we can set up more easily after the 9:15? No, we had the 10:15 at 10:30 five years ago and nobody came. Well, we could move the 9:15 to 9:00, and then we could take the ... no, no, we can't move the 9:15. *The 9:15??* Don't you know who goes to that? Bruised egos: 3. Actual progress: 0.
- The first item on a carefully typed agenda, deciding the date and time for the next meeting, becomes a power struggle. Well, I'm sorry, but Tuesday night is my opera night this year, and of course Father Porter can only make it on Mondays, so Mondays it will have to be. Well, who said *Father Porter* had to be

here for us to have a meeting?
Monday is the one night *I* can't
make! Elapsed time on insignificant
item: 45 minutes. Long-standing
conflicts papered over: 2. Actual
progress: 0.

- A highly paid music director is
requested to present his music
selections for Palm Sunday to the
parish committee for review — song
by song. Oh, I just can't *imagine*
Palm Sunday without "O Sacred
Head Surrounded" — can't we have
it somewhere, as a solo? And I know
just the person to sing it! Gray hairs
for music director: untold. Actual
progress: 0.

We could go on and on — just the way
many liturgy committee meetings do. In
one parish you see detailed "planning"
being done by people who won't ever
attend the liturgy in question, and
music being selected by nonmusicians.
In another you find uncomfortable
boredom, as people of good will try to
plan liturgies with no concept of what
there is to plan. In a third, you can find
elaborate plans for specific liturgies or
for entire seasons, yet with no
structured forum for evaluation after it's
over. In all of them, you can find lots of
argument about liturgy that boils down
to criticism of what someone else finds
helpful.

Above all, there are meetings —
usually long ones. And they're long for a
reason: Starved for a real sense of what
to do, or paralyzed by members with
plenty to defend but not much to offer,
liturgy committees will tend to focus on

Upon This Rock

While the term "liturgy committee" has
a peculiarly American ring, its existence
is in fact hinted at in the *General
Instruction of the Roman Missal*, Rome's
principal document on celebrating the
eucharist.

All concerned [italics ours] should
work together in the effective
preparation of each liturgical
celebration as to its rites, pastoral
aspects, and music. (Section 73)

Somewhat more inspiring (and less
ambiguous) is this passage from the
American bishops' 1972 (revised 1983)
Music in Catholic Worship.

The planning team or committee is
headed by the priest (celebrant
and homilist) for no congregation
can experience the richness of a
unified celebration if that unity is
not grasped by the one who
presides, as well as by those who
have special roles. The planning
group should include those with
the knowledge and artistic skills
needed in celebration: men and
women trained in music, poetry,
and art, and familiar with current
resources in this area; men and
women sensitive also to the
present-day thirst of so many for
the riches of scripture, theology,
and prayer. It is always good to
include some members of the
congregation who have not taken
special roles in the celebrations so
that honest evaluations can be
made. (Section 12)

Let's leave aside for the moment the
assumption that priests need to be in
charge of this process (we'll touch on
this in Chapter 3). The rest of that
paragraph — with its emphasis on
sensitivity to liturgical skills as well as

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Upon This Rock...continued

liturgical rules, and its recognition of the need for “honest evaluations” — is a wonderfully concise summary of what liturgy committees are about.

the safe, the manageable, and the trivial.

Sometimes all this trivia hides deep ideological conflicts. Sometimes it's poor direction from a well-meaning staff. Sometimes, it's simply not having an answer to this question: What are we all doing here?

Why Bother?

Before you start a liturgy committee in your parish, or before you join one, see if you can articulate exactly *why* you're doing it. Examining and expressing your reasons up front will prevent a lot of trouble down the line.

The official reason (see “Upon This Rock,” pages 4, 5) for liturgy committees is simple. Liturgy articulates and supports the faith of the community, and each community in our church is different. That means that the members of each community need to get involved.

It's simple, really: The community must be represented in the planning and evaluation of its liturgies. It is crucial for the clergy and professional staff of the parish to be supported by, and hear reactions from, a wide variety of community members. This kind of participation will mean that the needs of a community's members — and there will be a great variety of needs, changing constantly — are reflected in its liturgical life.

But it *doesn't* mean that liturgy is supposed to be a democracy, or that a community's liturgies are planned by majority votes on individual decisions. It *doesn't* mean that the parish avoids

using the best people it can find to be its presidors and professional liturgists, and it *doesn't* mean that you shouldn't give these people the freedom to do their jobs. It *doesn't* mean that individuals with strong feelings can run roughshod over anyone else. And above all, it *doesn't* mean that the liturgy should *look* like it was done by a committee: slow, bland, uncertain, and full of careful compromises.

Does all this sound contradictory? Perhaps. Liturgy committees are unique in most people's experience of organizational life.

We all know about autocracy, dictatorship, collaboration, democracy, teams — we know how these things work, and how we're supposed to behave when we're involved in one of them. But liturgy committees don't really fit into any of these categories very neatly.

Suddenly, in a liturgy committee, we need to be both democratic and undemocratic. Everyone's opinion matters, but long-established traditions, rules, and rituals matter too. We are eager for independent expert help, but ultimately its employer. We are uneducated in music and theater, but are asked to evaluate their effect on the liturgy. We respond emotionally to an event, but are asked to respect the emotional reactions of others. We may be accustomed to being uncritical of the church, but now must deal with what may be the faults of its clergy and imperfections in its decisions.

These are uncharted waters. And most liturgy committees are, to put it mildly, at sea out there.

Yet all is not lost. The problem here is not the concept. The problem is that management science, or canon law, or whatever, has not yet given the liturgy committee what any organization needs to survive: a mission. For a company, that mission is profits, or great software. For a college, the mission is education, or football. The liturgy committee and those involved in it need a goal, a yardstick like these. A few sentences to come back to when no one quite knows what to do next.

And for liturgy committee members too, there are only a few important things missing: a job description. A way of knowing what you're there for. A way of talking about liturgy.

In the remainder of this book we hope to help you a little with these problems. Let's begin with four simple statements about what liturgy committees do and how they do it.

A Few Principles of Organization

Rule No. 1

First, let's take a close look at the word most used in the area of liturgy committees: planning. Ask anyone what liturgy committees are supposed to do — ask the chairperson of your committee. They'll answer: We're supposed to plan liturgies.

Wrong.

If we communicate one concept in this book, it should be this: The liturgy committee represents the consensus of the community in matters relating to its liturgical life. If some of its members are involved in “planning” a particular liturgy, that’s all to the good. But the liturgy committee model that pictures a group — usually a rather miscellaneous one — making choices and working out logistics on a variety of liturgies has a serious and limiting flaw in its definition of liturgy.

A liturgy is more than a multiple-choice problem, or a string of questions with a limited number of answers to each part, where the planning process consists of plugging in one of the answers, perhaps even by vote. This is, perhaps, the model of planning that yields the frozen liturgy, one which remains the same not because it doesn’t need change but because the larger questions of its effectiveness are so hard to reduce to a bunch of composite parts to be voted up or down. A liturgy is far more a work of art than a quiz, and composing it should be left to the artists: your presider, your musicians, your director of liturgy, your people with talent.

Do you have poor presiders and musicians? As a liturgy committee you are supposed to do something about that, and we’ll get to that later. For now let’s articulate the first rule of liturgy committees:

Liturgy planning (the actual selection of music, the work on the homily, the writing of the prayers, the shaping of the environment, and the orchestration of all the other variables that make up a liturgy) should be left to the people you choose as your experts, preferably as small and as talented a group as possible. Empower them and leave them alone.

On one level, this makes sense simply from an organizational point of view: You won’t get good people as your musicians and liturgists, or keep them very long, or get very much work out of them, if you don’t leave them alone to do what they’ve been trained (we hope) to do well. It also reflects the church’s long-standing, and often ignored, principle of subsidiarity: that each task and decision should be undertaken by the smallest, most local group that can undertake it. (See “Small Is Beautiful” page 8.) Most important, it supports a much more efficient view of what large groups can do well, and what small groups do well. We’ll address all these issues in subsequent chapters.

But this first rule doesn’t mean that you, as a liturgy committee, are supposed to leave the people working most closely on your liturgies *completely* alone. You are there to evaluate their performance and give them feedback, assistance, and support. If they’re doing a bad job, or ignoring the guidelines you’ve set for them, or not working out with the community, make it your business to do something about it. By saying that you should leave your experts alone, we’re not suggesting a return to the days of let-Father-do-it. Far from it. A combination of independence

and fair evaluation is the way adults work together, and a liturgy committee should be no exception.

Rule No. 2

If “planning” is the most *overused* word in the life of most liturgy committees, then “evaluation” is the most *underused*. By evaluation we’re not talking about a quick post-mortem, a catalog of errors, a list of who did what wrong. We’re talking about the whole reason to put the community’s resources into the liturgy at all: Did our work make a difference? Did we accomplish what we really set out to do? What was the liturgy *like*?

Liturgy committees can go for years without ever addressing these questions, yet they should be at the top of every agenda at every meeting. To plan a liturgy means that you have a result in mind; to evaluate a liturgy means to measure against a goal.

No liturgical planning process — for a particular weekly liturgy, a special occasion, or a parish’s liturgical life as a whole — is complete without a genuine evaluation.

Now we’re not suggesting that each liturgy, each week, has to be followed by a session of agonizing reappraisal. But we are saying that part of every parish’s liturgical structure has to be evaluations — of those charged with celebrating the liturgies, of the direction of a particular liturgy, of the parish as a whole.

Why don’t people evaluate? The harshest answer would be that they

Small Is Beautiful

This supremely important principle of social philosophy, one which cannot be set aside or altered, remains firm and unshaken: just as it is wrong to withdraw from the individual and commit to the community at large what private enterprise and endeavor can accomplish, so it is likewise unjust and a gravely harmful disturbance of right order to turn over to a greater society of higher rank functions and services which can be performed by lesser bodies on a lower plane. For a social undertaking of any sort, by its very nature, ought to aid the members of the body social, but never to destroy and absorb them.¹

When Pius XI set forth this principle of subsidiarity, he gave the church a rule that it has since applied in areas from development economics to the theory of private property. It has, you may have noticed, been somewhat less successful in applying it to the Roman church itself.² No matter. Subsidiarity is not just a theory that tries to preserve human dignity, but a recognition of some basic propensities of human nature: People work better and get more out of things when they have (or even think they have) autonomy over the concerns that they think they are better qualified to judge than anyone else. If you are prepared to admit that the principle is a valid one — and if you are willing to go so far as to say that liturgy is in any sense a “social undertaking” — then subsidiarity suggests some guidelines for liturgy committees that are both practical and moral:

1. Don’t impose uniformity where there doesn’t need to be any.
2. Don’t waste your time on small

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Small Is Beautiful...continued

matters someone else could be deciding.

3. Your committee exists to help liturgies, not be in charge of them.

1. From *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931). Quoted in *The Gospel of Peace and Justice*, ed. Joseph Gremillion (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977), p. 322.

2. "Subsidiarity began to wane in the Church," writes Andrew M. Greeley, "when the cable and steamship reinforced the autocratic propensities of the Renaissance papacy" (in *No Bigger Than Necessary* [New York: Meridian, 1977], p. 14).

don't want to *be* evaluated or have a comfortable tradition scrutinized. Or maybe an overdeveloped sense of politeness means that no one ever criticizes an honest effort, no matter how abysmal the result. More common, however, is probably the simplest answer of all: People don't know what they were really trying to "do" in the first place. The result? What passes for evaluation at those meetings that make an attempt to deal with it: I liked it. Period. I didn't like it. Period.

Evaluating, in a way, is a lot harder than planning, but that could only be because planning *seems* so much easier after you begin to evaluate regularly. Setting up a process of evaluation forces you to articulate what you want right up front. And when you know what your overall yardstick will be, that makes it easier to make your more detailed decisions about what will go on at your liturgy — just as an outline for a book (articulating what you want) makes the actual writing (planning and execution) a whole lot easier.

The things you do in liturgy should be done for a reason, and with a goal in mind; evaluation forces you to face up to this fact, and to make choices based on *the result you want* and not on repeating the only things you happen to know. Think of evaluating not so much as a report card on a liturgy but as a way of forcing yourself to set goals for a liturgy, and of putting your own reactions — even emotional ones — into words.

Rule No. 3

Much of the talk that goes on in liturgy committees seems to focus on nonessentials — on special variations in a liturgy that affect one particular week or event, or on logistical issues (parking, scheduling) that often conceal much more important questions of how well your parish celebrates. Few, if any, committees have learned that their work each Sunday should be based less on special variations and extras, and much more on the prayers and rituals that don't change from week to week.

Most liturgy committee work should focus on “the basics” — doing the fundamental actions of welcoming, Word, and Eucharist exceedingly well, week after week.

Note that by “basics” we don't necessarily mean “details”: the specific music chosen, the prayers that are used, the logistics of setup. As we'll suggest over and over, those are projects best left to talented individuals or to smaller working groups outside of the parish committee setting. What we mean by “basics” here is regularly reviewing the major building blocks of Sunday liturgy: studying what our tradition and our church tell us about their possibilities, and then taking a careful look at how they find expression in your parish.

As you'll see in Chapter 6 when we deal with these basic issues in more detail, it's not that there is one “right” way to celebrate the liturgy of the Word, or the liturgy of the Eucharist, or to welcome your assembly. These are never-to-be-exhausted topics where every committee will find different priorities and a different set of issues on which to work. One parish, depending on its history and current state, may take an entire year to review and improve the work of its eucharistic ministers, the appearance and taste of the elements used for bread and wine, or to bring communion under both species to your celebrations. Another parish, with those practices and changes already in place, may have a more complex discussion about what should be going on in the church during the actual reception of communion — how music is used, how (or whether) to express the idea of the entire communion rite being a “procession,” how to introduce more of a sense of sharing a common meal into what may seem an individualized reception of the sacrament. That's why liturgy committees have such enormous potential: At their best, they study, and discuss, and then find the expression of the church's liturgy that is the right one for their particular community at this time in its history.

We believe delivering on those basics will, over time, be a greater gift to your community than any other work you can do. Later on in Chapter 5, when we suggest the main agenda items on which your committee should be focusing, you'll find that these are the places where we think constant evaluation and hard

work will really pay off. Committees often resist focusing on the basics — it's not as finite or task-oriented as "planning Lent," or arguing about the schedule. An hour spent chewing over a really big, "basic" issue may never give you the same sense of accomplishment as crossing off a dozen items on your to-do list. Instead, these basics involve sharpening your awareness of subtleties (how silence is used, the effect space and the visual arts have on what you do) and long months of detail-oriented study and training with your parish's ministers and staff. But we think you'll find that parishes with good liturgy are almost always places where great care has been taken with the readings, the Eucharist, and basic issues of welcome and hospitality.

Rule No. 4

If evaluation and focusing on the basics are the meat-and-potatoes of every liturgy committee meeting, then you're probably asking a very obvious question: How is all the work we're doing now supposed to get done?

The fact is that most liturgy committees aren't doing their work as efficiently as they could. Most of their time is spent brainstorming issues where the consensus of a group isn't needed or where one or two people could easily work out a solution. In later chapters, we'll explore the issue of what big groups do best, and why smaller groups and the work of individuals are so indispensable. For now, let's just point out that not everything your group needs to accomplish will, or should, get worked on in the monthly parish liturgy committee meeting.

A parish liturgy committee needs a network of smaller working groups and teams that work on particular projects and issues. Save the parish committee for the big-picture issues only it can discuss.

Here's your answer to the question of what happens to most of those topics your parish committee may be discussing currently: They don't go away, they just move into a smaller, and we hope more productive, setting. Working out how to get the collection taken up faster, or less disruptively, is a matter that can legitimately be raised in your parish committee. But the *solution* can be worked out by your head usher and your committee member who's an operations expert — outside of the regular meeting, and perhaps even by some people who aren't part of the liturgy committee. A smaller team like that is also where to work out the logistics of the Easter Vigil fire: where it should be, who'll light it, who'll put it out. The larger parish committee should save its time for more important questions: whether or not the Vigil fire last year knocked everyone's socks off, as it should have, or whether the Vigil as a whole was truly the year's liturgical high point, as it also should have been.

Many of the examples of bad meetings we listed at the beginning of this chapter could have been avoided with a better understanding of what sort of issue was the

parish committee's business and which was a good topic to take into a smaller group, or assign to an individual for a little research and a proposed solution. We'll get into this in more detail in Chapter 5, where we deal with agendas and how to focus a parish committee's attention on the issues it needs to face. For now, just take our word for it — productive committees find ways to spend time on big issues like the following.

- Is the overall liturgical life of the parish varied enough? Are there groups within your parish (children, non-English-speakers, seniors) that your liturgies could serve better?
- What would be the response of a person walking in off the street to liturgy X, or Y, or Z? What are *your* responses as a committee?
- How well do we celebrate the liturgy of the Eucharist? How well do we proclaim the Scriptures? What are our goals for a year from now to improve our celebrations?
- Will particular seasons or feasts affect all our parish's liturgies? In what ways? Are there feasts of seasons or celebrations our parish neglects or overemphasizes?
- Is our money being spent in the best possible way? Are we devoting enough of the parish's resources to liturgy?
- Is there feedback that needs to be given to the parish staff? To lectors? To ushers? What can we do to make our liturgical ministries healthier, and better at what they do?

These are tough questions, ones most well-meaning parishioners will feel themselves unequipped to discuss. We hope to show them that they're wrong — that all they need are common sense, some study and learning with one another, a little practice in articulating reactions and emotions, and at least some exposure to good, deeply affecting liturgy. In fact, in Chapter 6, we'll look at this whole issue of "good" liturgy, and how your committee can apply that shared vision to the circumstances and history of your community.

So it's a wonderful system, in theory. Now all you need are the right people.

Finding the Right People

Stop right there, you may say. That's the whole problem. I can't get anyone to join the committee. Or the people that are on it don't want to be there, don't have any ideas, or have nothing but a laundry list of things they *don't* want. Besides: Why should anyone join our parish's committee?

Good liturgy committee members will join for one reason only: because you've got a well-run group, a group that knows what it's supposed to do, does it expeditiously, and has fun doing it.

How many people join (or get conned into joining) a group just because they

feel like they should? Or because they systematically join every parish organization on a rotating basis? Or — to be frank — because they've got nothing better to do?

We're going to be harsh, and tell you that you don't want these people — at least, not on these terms. The people who should be on parish liturgy committees are articulate and interested. That means they're probably busy. They don't have time for groups that sit around wasting it. They want to know exactly what you want them to do.

Whether you're starting a new committee, recruiting new members for an old one, or cleaning house in a committee with problems, your committee's leadership owes it to everyone to produce what everyone with a job to do deserves: a job description. The job you want done, what you expect of them, how much of their time and energy it will all take. Yes, tell them how much it will mean to the community, and how much they stand to learn. But above all, give them a clear sense of what the committee is for, and what its members are for.

Ask some average parishioners what they think they would have to know to join the liturgy committee. Those who don't think that Latin is a prerequisite would probably guess that some expertise in the liturgical documents and rubrics would be. Go one step further and ask them what they think happens at a typical liturgy meeting, and you'll probably get a puzzled silence. Whatever they're picturing in their minds, it probably doesn't look like fun.

They would probably be surprised to hear that the primary prerequisite for membership should be the ability to *talk*.

You may have plenty of talk already, and you may be sick of it. But what you need is *real* talk about liturgy — reactions to liturgy, preferably emotional yet experienced reactions. You need talk that tries to figure out what *caused* these reactions. Contrast that with most "talk" you hear at liturgy meetings: "I hate things like that." "Was that legal?" "It was *really nice*."

You can do a lot to nip this kind of thing right in the bud. Create a job description for your liturgy committee members, and (as we'll discuss in Chapter 3 on membership) create an actual admissions process that screens out people who just don't fit the bill. Cruel? Perhaps — but not any more cruel than some of the meetings we described at the beginning of this chapter.

For now consider the following criteria for membership on any liturgy committee, either at the parish level or for an individual liturgy. Use some or all of them, but do use them — adapt them and publish them in the bulletin each fall and spring, hand them out to prospective members. You'll find that such a process turns off some of those who don't want to do what you're describing — and intrigues those who might not otherwise come forward.

A Job Description

1. You must be interested in liturgy.

This doesn't mean studying liturgy academically, although someone with a thorough knowledge of the Coptic night office, or some such, is a terrific resource (as well as good for laughs). It also doesn't mean a *proprietary* interest in liturgy — people with an approach or a style that is indispensable (so they think) to the life of the church. You'll find a lot of these people on liturgy committees, and in the clergy and as professional musicians. You'll need plenty of people with a *real* interest to counteract them.

What we mean by “interested in liturgy” is more a case of someone who at one time or another has been profoundly affected by liturgy. It may only have been a single liturgy in one time and place, or a regular community that someone found memorable and sustaining. But that experience gave them a certain curiosity about how liturgy works — about why some liturgies produce these profound feelings of presence and celebration, and others don't even rate the word boring. Such an experience will often generate a quest for another liturgy or community that can recreate that powerful experience from their past. If they can distance themselves from that past experience to some extent — that is, if they can realize that the point is not to recreate a very likely unrecratable experience, but to understand what made that experience so memorable — these are the ideal people to work on liturgy.

You'll find plenty of people in your search who think that they “like” liturgy. That they “love the Mass.” That they feel called upon to learn about this great repository of tradition. That the Mass is the primary focus of their spiritual lives. These are all admirable things, but they are red flags in the search for people to serve on a liturgy committee. Find people who know what they're looking for but haven't found it yet, not people who'll take anything as long as it's what they're familiar with. You'll probably find yourself with a smaller number of committee members but far better off in both ideas and efficiency.

2. You are willing to serve — not pay lip service to — the parish as a whole.

Using our first criterion alone, you'll find people with a point of view. But a point of view is not the same thing as a set of pet peeves. There are plenty of people who have an allegiance to a particular liturgy, or at least to a liturgical style with which they are comfortable. But people who genuinely feel that the parish ought to reflect a *variety* of needs are another story.

You've probably seen this phenomenon at work in your parish. Some people who hate organ music hate it even when they're not hearing it — not only don't

they want it at the liturgy they go to, they secretly don't want it at the other parish liturgies either. They'll fight to keep the organist from getting a raise, and God forbid they should actually go to the organ mass and try to see what everyone likes so much, or whether there is anything that can be said in its favor. It's fine to be a passionate advocate, but people this passionate can easily be destructive as committee members, where a certain interest in contrasting points of view is part of the job.

Expand this question still further — can you find people for your committee who would be willing to venture inside a *Protestant* church? Perhaps to see whether it really is irresistible when a big Lutheran congregation (or even a small one) shakes the roof with a hymn? Or whether the standards of preaching really are higher at the Episcopal cathedral? Or why so many former Catholics seem to be attracted to the enthusiasm of the local evangelical congregation? You need people who realize that what goes on inside these other buildings is liturgy, too.

So partly, we are asking for a willingness to listen — to make it possible for people with different sensibilities and personal histories to have their say in your committee's meetings. But it goes beyond that. Groups who disagree with one member's individual point of view may not only need a chance to express themselves in meetings, but to see their sensibilities reflected in the style of your parish's liturgies. That means you need committee members who are not only willing to listen, but who can be genuinely tolerant of at least some ways of doing things liturgically that they don't like, because they recognize that others in the parish find them useful and valuable. It's a big church we're all members of, so when building your committee find people who admit it, and who in fact kind of like it that way.

3. You must be able to talk.

Again, let's define "talk" as more than just opinions. Talk, to our way of thinking, is not only being able to express your reactions, but also a willingness to reflect with others on a deeper understanding of what might have *caused* your reactions. This doesn't have to be, and shouldn't be, overly touchy-feely. You don't have to go into the spiritual experience you had during the communion meditation, particularly if you tend to have them regularly. But you should be able to answer a few basic questions about any liturgy you attend:

- What caused your reactions, positive or negative?
- Was there an overall problem, or were there just few things that alienated you or distracted you? Were they problems peculiar to your own taste, or a real conflict with the demands of good liturgy as you understand it? (Again, we'll talk more in Chapter 6 about what can help build a committee's understanding of "good" liturgy.)

- Were there parts that seemed particularly effective to you, that made an impression on you at the time?
- Can you imagine a group of people finding this liturgy rewarding? Why?

These are the kinds of questions the members of your committee ought to be able to address about the liturgies in your parish or in any parish, and in a civilized manner. Talking about how the liturgy does what it does, and how it affects you and the others in your parish at a deep and emotional level, is at the heart of your committee's business. You'll need to be able to talk about liturgy this way if you ever want to evaluate your work as regularly as we suggested earlier in the chapter. So look for members who are confident enough in themselves and their feelings to contribute to a discussion in a meaningful way, while not dominating the group or boring people to tears.

4. You must be willing to fight for what you need.

Realistically, it won't be unusual for a committee or a planning group to need to go through a good bit of effort to get what it deserves. Liturgies deserve good presiders, good homilies, good music, and a good place for all these to happen, and you may find you have none of the above.

Often, of course, the situation is irreparable. Your parish may not have nearly enough money even for lights and heat, much less professional music help or a renovation of the building. But more often than not there is simply a campaign of some sort ahead of you — long discussions and perhaps even conflicts with the parish council, with the pastor, with the music director. (It is no exaggeration to say that “long” here can mean years, especially when the problem is deeply entrenched.) How much your committee has to say about such matters depends a great deal on the official role that has been established for it in the parish's structure (see the next chapter). But whatever the case, the committee has a duty to place sensitive issues on the agenda on a regular basis. Find people who are willing to deal with them and, when the occasion demands, say what needs to be said — directly but constructively.

5. You should not be bulldozeable by authorities.

The fact that your Ph.D. music director digs up a Bach cantata written to go with the very readings you have this Sunday doesn't make it an effective choice. You need people who aren't embarrassed to say so. Some ancient Christian practices have fallen into disuse because they were not helpful to the community; having a resident historian who can recall them verbatim may not be the shot in the arm your liturgy needs. And of course, even a pastor may have some of his own strongly held opinions and preferences — which, despite what he says, may or may not be in line with our church's current liturgical laws or honored traditions.

We'll discuss in later chapters how a committee can find constructive ways to

bring such issues to the surface productively. For now, simply note that you'll need people with just a bit of courage — who are always willing to listen, but who can also on occasion tell the emperor he has no clothes.

6. You must be willing to celebrate.

Here's the real shocker. It is sad to see how few people *enjoy* going about the work of liturgy.

In the first place, your meetings ought to be fun just so people stick with the group. If your committee is not providing its members with a certain level of friendship, satisfaction, and laughs, you'll quickly find yourself with the members who simply have nothing better to do. You'll also discover that people who are uncomfortable together in an informal setting don't get very much good work done together either — and that tense or boring meetings translate into tense or boring liturgy.

Second, no one seems to realize that liturgy has tremendous opportunities for fun. Oh, not just making fun of bad cantors and homilists, although that's definitely good for an occasional impersonation contest. Preparing for and serving as a minister in a liturgy can bring much of the excitement and tension of putting on a show — and people who put on shows usually have a keen sense of how funny it is when the carefully prepared goes awry, when a predictable personality suddenly begins his usual routine, when reality and real people make a surprising intrusion into a supposedly exalted activity. They also know the release of tension and the rush of satisfaction after a good “production” does exactly what it was supposed to do.

We hope you have at least one person on your committee who can play the role of court jester. As for everyone else, make sure they're not horrified by the idea of laughing (after the fact) at what went wrong on Good Friday. Watch out for the people who just sit there quietly when everyone else seems to be having a good time.

7. You must value liturgy as a crucial service provided by your community.

We won't enter into the debate on whether a vital liturgical life flows from a healthy parish, or whether it's good liturgy that builds and expands a community's vision of itself. (Is it possible both statements are true?) For now, simply note one of the most down-to-earth statements from our church's documents on liturgy — two sentences every liturgy committee might want to remember when they're tempted to spend another hour working out the parking crisis:

Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken and destroy it.¹

1. *Music in Catholic Worship*, section 6. This and most of the other church documents related to liturgy are available in several useful anthologies, listed with many other resources in Appendix A.

“Good” and “bad” are loaded words, of course, and we’ll devote most of our last chapter to discussing what they might really mean when we talk about liturgy. But the statement is a powerful one nevertheless: Liturgy makes a difference in people’s lives, and a parish that takes this ministry seriously does more good than it can ever possibly know.

Each week, you as a community have one chance to reach, somehow, both those people who for some reason come to one of your liturgies every week and those who just happen to wander in. If not the most significant opportunity for ministry you are faced with each week, it is certainly the most obvious.

An effective parish liturgy committee, at least now and then, is able to see liturgy in this way — not as logistics, not as a list of things that can go wrong or be done wrong, not as a way to get what you happen to like personally, but as *opportunity*. The people who are there in your church each week are there because they’re looking for something: Are you giving them everything you can and should? The people who aren’t there are staying away because there’s something they want to avoid, or because they want something they haven’t found yet: What is it?

In your search for committee members, you don’t have to find people who are interested in proselytizing, who want to run up to everyone after Mass, shake their hands, and ask them how their spiritual lives are. But you do want people who regard liturgy as more than something they do for themselves — who know that in addition it is something we build to reach out to others.

How many of these people should you get? Who will choose them? How will you get things done? In the next chapter we begin to address these inevitable realities.