

Lighten Up

Working on parish liturgy is a big job. It requires the political skills of a ward heeler, the judgment of an artist, the sensitivity to parish needs of a true minister. No one can do all these things perfectly, and no parish will have perfect liturgy. You may work for years to make just a few things happen liturgically in your parish, only to see it all fail to take shape.

If you love liturgy, you'll naturally feel passionately about wanting it to be wonderful, always. In closing, here are two things to keep in mind that will perhaps absolve you from some of the overwhelming sense of responsibility you'll feel to make sure that liturgy in your parish is as good as you want it to be.

Most Liturgy Problems Are Community Problems

One of your authors once worked in a parish where the liturgy committee tried for years to institute communion under both species — bread *and* wine. Yet it never caught on. Very few members of the community took advantage of the opportunity to share from the chalice. We tried everything: explanations during the homily, notes in the bulletin, different communion stations and types of chalices, even medical notices telling people how unlikely it was that they could catch a dread disease from one sip from a cup. Nothing worked, and we felt like failures.

Over time, however, we had a revelation: The community as a whole *did not want to share from the cup*. Sharing from one cup is a deep symbol of unity and commitment to one another. That commitment, that sense of identity and of sharing, simply was not present. You could argue that sharing from the cup would have helped to build that sense of unity, and that's probably true. But liturgy reflects the reality of a community just as much as it helps to change that reality, and the fact was that the community did not feel close enough to one another to share as deeply as the Eucharist invites.

That's just one example of how liturgy is shaped by the particular histories and issues of your community. Liturgy committees and liturgists often lament how a community

behaves liturgically, whereas the real culprit is a larger issue of how your community feels about itself, or one another. If all the members of your assembly sit in the back, despite your best efforts, perhaps they simply lack adult faith, and do not feel that they are fully members of the church. If people don't sing, they may not feel that faith merits singing about. Healing these situations goes beyond the power of liturgical ministry.

Recognizing all this, of course, may in a way make you feel worse, since it may tell you some things about your community you hate to admit, or raise larger questions about how to minister to your parish outside of the context of liturgy. But as a parish liturgist, it's useful to remember that not everything that is wrong with a community is your fault, or something you can fix. Permit it, now and then, to resolve just some of the guilt and frustration you feel trying to generate participation, enthusiasm, singing, and prayer.

Remember, You Never Know

A friend of ours who's the director of a diocesan liturgy office tells the following story. He swears it's true; we know it's not. But it doesn't matter.

There was once a married couple where the woman went faithfully to church each week for years upon years, while her husband had long ago lost interest in attending, and in his faith generally. For a while, early in their marriage, she'd asked him to come along now and then, and then she'd finally given up.

Suddenly, one Sunday, she worked up her courage, and asked him to come along with her to the 10:00 Mass. To her amazement and surprise, he got up from the living room chair and came with her.

The first part of the Mass went just fine, but when the pastor began his homily, she couldn't believe her ears. There was to be no homily that Sunday. Instead, the pastor launched into a 15-minute, detailed report on the parish's finances, everything from the boiler to the parking lot repaving. The one Sunday she'd asked her husband to Mass in fifteen years, and this was what he was hearing! She was mortified.

On the way out of church afterward, she was worried about even asking him what he'd thought, and figured she'd just leave the topic alone. Imagine her amazement when she saw him deep in conversation with the pastor, laughing and chatting. As they got into the car a few minutes later, he said, "You know, anyone who's as sensible about money as that guy must really have something on the ball. Let's go to that dinner he announced at the end of Mass."

The moral of the story? Even bad liturgy can act on us through the power of grace. The results of what we do in any kind of ministry are never predictable. Anything can happen. Good work is never wasted.

So, if you've had a bad liturgy, a bad meeting, or a bad year generally, go have a beer with your friends from the parish and lighten up. If you're working on liturgy, you deserve it.