

## Formation

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### Focusing on the Task of the Parish Liturgy Committee - Part two

(For Part One of this article by Barry Copley refer to the previous issue of "Liturgy" - p7, Vol 26 No2, June 2001)

#### Planning?

From what has already been said, can you now see my reservations with the expression "planning" liturgy?

When we say we 'plan' liturgy, I believe we subconsciously assume that our task is to invent, create or assemble a liturgy. The result is usually a hodgepodge of variations based on the assumption that the Christian assembly is quickly bored by its own major symbols.

The Sunday Eucharist is the ritual meeting between God's people and their God at a common table. This

meeting does not depend on planning. It is God's initiative. It is God's work. Although we gather for prayer, it is the God who calls us; although it is we who share the bread broken and the wine poured out, these are the God's gifts to us; although it is we who proclaim and listen to the scriptures, it is the God who speaks them.

The Spirit of God moves where, when and how God wills. We cannot plan for it. But while we cannot plan for it we can be ready, open, and

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prepared to meet the God whenever God should choose to come. Unable as we are to plan for this, we can prepare for it. More—we should prepare for it. We should "prepare the way of the Lord" and make straight the paths to him. We must, therefore, prepare for worship.

This will involve:

- preparing the place where the assembly will gather for worship; that place where creator and created will meet.
- helping the assembly gather together as an assembly.
- preparing for the proclamation of the scriptures so that the assembly will hear the Word when it is proclaimed. This involves preparing both those who proclaim and those who listen.
- preparing the music-prayer so that all can sing the praises of the One who calls us together.
- preparing the simple meal of bread and wine so that all might be fed by the "bread of life and the cup of eternal salvation".
- preparing the assembly to go out to live what has just been celebrated.

This, then, is the role of those who as a group commit themselves to helping the assembly prepare - the "Liturgy Preparation Team." Its patron saints are John and Peter:

"The day of Unleavened Bread arrived. .... Jesus sent Peter and John off with the instructions, 'Go and prepare our Passover supper for us. .... A man will show you an upstairs room, spacious and furnished. It is there you are to prepare.' They went and found everything just as he had said; and accordingly they prepared the Passover supper." (Luke 22:7-13)

John and Peter certainly did not plan the Last Supper. They prepared the room and the supper. Their service was simple and basic, sweeping the floor, and setting the table. They prepared the place. It was no big deal. Once prepared then it was the Lord who was able to give himself to his friends in the bread broken and the cup poured out. Without the preparation this would not have been possible. The ministry of Peter and John is the ministry of the "Liturgy Preparation Team"; the gift of Jesus is the purpose of all the preparation.

## What next?

Should we scrap the Liturgy Planning Team, therefore, and leave everything in the hands of the Holy Spirit? No!

There is much to be done to prepare the assembly

- to gather well
- to prepare to listen
- to listen and respond to the Word of God
- to pray well
- to sing well
- to eat well
- to feed others
- to go forth
- to prepare the assembly to be open to meet its God.

## Where to Start?

One place to initiate a change in direction is how the Liturgy Group deals with the readings.

If you see your role as planning the liturgy you will be concerned to agree on a unifying "theme" in the readings. Even when, for example, during the Sundays of Ordinary Time, the readings are chosen so that there is no connection between the first reading

and the second, or between the second reading and the Gospel, you will still try to find a unifying theme. This will then be given to the musicians to arrange suitable hymns. It will also form the basis of what the commentator says, of the penitential rite, and for the other prayers. Opening prayers may even be composed because the official ones do not fit this theme.

Agreeing on a theme will usually occupy a considerable part of the effort that goes into the readings. (It will also be the occasion for subtle power games as one tries to convince the other that his or her theme is really the correct one.) What is being said by this approach is, in effect:

- There is only one theme in all three readings.
- It is the role of the Liturgy Planning Team to discover this theme.
- This theme then forms the unifying element in this Mass.
- People should hear this theme as it is replayed through the commentator's introduction, the Penitential Rite, the Prayers, the Prayer of the Faithful etc., and especially through the hymns.

**Unfortunately, what is not usually realized is:**

- Those who chose the readings for the 34 Sundays of Ordinary Time

deliberately rejected a unifying theme as their basis of selection.

- Most of the readings can have numerous themes, if one is looking for themes, and it is often impossible to narrow them down to any one theme.
- The act of proclaiming the scriptures is a vastly richer activity than teaching a theme or giving a message.
- Given that the Spirit breathes over all, God will conceivably say different things to different people since people's readiness to hear will be different. To say that the Spirit intends only one theme or message to be heard is muzzling the Spirit.
- If the theme is abstract like 'faith' or 'love', it is very seldom helpful either to prayer or to concentration.

**On the other hand, if you see your role as preparation you will approach the word of God with more respect.**

Each person's insights will be treated with equal respect. In preparation the readings will be read (preferably Gospel, first reading, second reading, in that order). They will then be broken open by means of reflections such as:

- What did you hear when the reading was proclaimed?
- What would it cost to believe what you have heard?
- What is the doubt, pain or sin in your life that this reading touches?

- What does this parable tell us about ourselves, about God?
- Can you identify with any of the characters in the reading(s). Which? Why?
- What do you feel when you hear Jesus saying these words?
- What will you now do as a result of hearing this word of God?

*"The day of Unleavened Bread arrived. ....Jesus sent Peter and John off with the instructions, 'Go and prepare our Passover supper for us. .... A man will show you an upstairs room, spacious and furnished. It is there you are to prepare.' They went and found everything just as he had said; and accordingly they prepared the Passover supper." (Luke 22:7-13)*

The response to these, or similar questions, are shared. No one response is the "right answer". God speaks in different ways to different people. The responses are simply shared without debate and jotted down. At the end of the time allotted for this part of the meeting, no attempt is made to "bring it all together". No attempt is made to find a unifying theme. No! What has been tabled is a rich smorgasbord of reactions, impressions, emotions, images, memories, challenges, prayers, resolutions. This forms the raw material that can now be used, for example, to choose hymns, to prepare introductions. It does not matter that there is a great variety here. There is no need to artificially unify all this richness under one theme. Leave it alone in all its richness. It is the shared faith of those who allow themselves to be open to the word of God, of those who dare to break open the word. Leave the crooked lines crooked. (God can write straight with crooked lines if God so chooses!) Leave the disorder. (God is a God of disorder as much as a God of order!) God can speak just as effectively through disorder as through order.

If you handle the word of God with the reverence outlined above you will also reverence each other as vehicles

of God's revelation to you. Suddenly, liturgy preparation meetings become occasions not to be missed!

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## November Feasts

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### November

November always has a special flavour all of its own. Not only is our working year rushing inexorably to its conclusion with a pace that seems to increase year by year, the Liturgical year too mirrors our flight to conclusion with readings about the end times and the heavenly banquet. At the beginning of this month the Church gives us two feasts that also turn our thoughts towards our destiny; All Saints (November 1) and All Souls (November 2).

In his introduction to the month of November in *Sourcebook for Sundays and Seasons* 2001 (LTP, Chicago) Peter J. Scagnelli writes: "Liturgically, Vatican II's calendar and Lectionary have refined a longstanding Catholic tradition: November is a month-long celebration of the communion of saints, of remembrance and prayer for those gone before us, and of heightened

anticipation of Christ's Second Coming. Within each of these themes are complementary liturgical moods.

### All Saints and All Souls

The example of the saints, which is meant to inspire us, may also discourage us as we reflect on how far we are from being the disciples that baptism calls us to be. Yet their intercession on our behalf makes them "a cloud of witnesses," a cheering section of sisters and brothers urging us onward, convincing us that, by God's grace and not our own effort, the crown can be won.

The memory of our departed loved ones is bound to be bittersweet. We miss the physical presence of those who gave us life, who shared our lives, whom we loved and who loved us back. The scriptures and prayers are filled