

Catechism on the Liturgy I, 2

B. Some warnings about active participation.

1. Active participation in the liturgy can lead (sometimes clearly, sometimes imperceptibly) to a sort of taking possession of the liturgy. It can become in a sense the property of those who celebrate, who see the liturgy as a terrain for their “creativity.” This leads to a kind of liturgical coup by which the sacred is eliminated, the language trivialized, and worship turned into a mere social event. The real subject of the liturgy is no longer God, but the person celebrating and/or the community which celebrates with him.

a. This is not to say all creativity is and must be banned from the liturgy. The organ was broken in an Austrian church one Christmas eve, and the pastor asked a guitarist to come up with a hymn accompanied by the guitar, and we received *Silent Night*. Our sanctuary is not configured well for a Solemn High Mass. So we have to improvise a bit in the movements of the ministers in the sanctuary.

b. But one cannot simply transform and re-arrange the whole thing. Fr. Hearty and I are not creators of the liturgy; we are servants and guardians of its myster-

ies. Both individually and collectively as a parish our fundamental orientation must be to God.

2. The purpose of these inserts will be to explain the liturgy so that we can better participate. But the prayers of the liturgy are almost entirely structured on Sacred Scripture. And one of the difficulties in grasping the meaning of the texts is the fact that much if not all of the mentality and culture from which they stem has disappeared. The images of God which the texts convey show this problem: e.g., the God who sleeps, the God of wrath, etc.

a. But the modern proclivity to dump these texts or secondary gestures such as the washing of the feet on Holy Thursday on the grounds that they are passé, or old-fashioned, or medieval, or monastic (I’ve heard all this tripe) is as dumb as dirt. I can remember a lecture in which the priest was pleading for the removal of the word “Easter” on the grounds that the word came from a Babylonian goddess named Ishtar. “We should say Resurrection Day instead.” His whole lecture reminded me of the Austrian emperor who did-

n't like one of Mozart's opera's because it had too many notes. "Which notes do you want taken out?" replied Mozart. Does the fact that we no longer see shepherds and flocks every day mean that such images are no longer comprehensible? Is it because no one at OLMC has ever met a seraph that the metaphorical power of this messenger no longer speaks to us? Nonsense. Half of the poetry ever written makes use of images and terms that are not part of daily life. These words and symbols are a part of a biblical and liturgical mother tongue which simply cannot be replaced. It is a language that must be learned.

b. The desire of modern liturgists to have a form of worship which may be grasped by everyone in the congregation at first hearing is also absurd. Now there are things which we should be able to grasp immediately. When I play pick-up basketball at the YMCA, it needs to be understood immediately that the first five to make a bucket from the top of the key are team # 1. These rules need to be simple, clear and immediately apprehensible. But when divine realities are concerned, this approach just doesn't work. Love, death, sin, joy, hope...these can *never* be grasped at once or on first inspection. Deep realities only

gradually yield their full significance. So understanding is a lengthy and progressive process of becoming familiar with a particular reality. This is one of many reasons why the liturgy must have a great stability; not just in texts but also in gestures, vestments, and music.

3. Analysis or dissection then, is out of place when *considering* the liturgy. I use the word *consider* purposefully, since it's from the Latin and means "with starlight." That's not a very bright light. Our approach must not be analytical but dialogical instead, like a dialogue or conversation, allowing the liturgy time to say what it has to say; listening attentively to its overtones and allowing its deeper meaning to unfold. This sounds strange to liturgical Neanderthals who chuckle with evident approval about "Father X who could say Mass and give a sermon and be done with the whole thing in fifteen minutes." It will sound strange, but for the most part liturgical celebration in most churches is probably way too short. They do not provide enough time or space to enter into the event. The liturgy needs time to deliver its riches. And silence.