

Pastoral Perspective

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

The Ministering Church -- Life and Liturgy

(Homily prepared for the Eighth Annual Liturgical Institute of the Diocese of Rochester — August 25-26 with more than 240 in attendance on the Campus of Keuka College)

I offer this Eucharistic Liturgy today with deepest gratitude to all who have prepared us for this great moment of celebration. It is in the Liturgy more than anywhere else that we discover what the Church looks like. In the Liturgy, our words, songs, prayers and gestures tell us who we are, how we function, and what gives us life.



It has been my experience that if in the Liturgy we find a passive congregation, a show conscious group of musicians, automaton presiders, officious ushers, or carelessly prepared and ill-equipped lectors, then in the social order of that parish we will probably find a passive, uninspired community; or at best one active only on the periphery of the Church's life.

Here and now, in this liturgical assembly, and in the thousand variations of assemblies we can find in the world, we discover and perform our Christian ministry.

It is, of course, not all that there is to ministry. Much of the caring and honoring and giving persons space to live and develop into the full dignity of their humanity does not take place in formal liturgical settings.

But genuine human service cannot take place unless it is marked by the discovery of a shared meaning. We need to share a common hope, a common vision of what we are called to be.

We need this word and altar ritual that we perform this afternoon to stand as a paradigm, our best effort, for what we mean by Christian ministry. Liturgy is not the only revelation of the mystery of God in our lives, but it is the most intense and the most effective.

The effect of good or bad liturgy is not just the way it makes us feel while it is happening; for we can only measure the quality of our liturgies by the effect they have on the rest of the world when we leave.

Inevitably our ministry beyond the church door will be mirrored in our liturgical assemblies. Without living vibrant assemblies led by competent and confident liturgical ministers who regularly gather to rediscover and deepen the meaning of their lives in liturgical prayer, everything else we do will soon become empty and vain.

We must never lose sight of our fundamental identity, and our need to give expression to the saving, reconciling presence of Jesus in our lives, and this need to express, to enliven the mystery of God among us, is best taken up in the Liturgy. It is here the glory of God most clearly fills His temple, the people of His inheritance. It is here we remember that God dwells among us forever as the reading from the Prophet Ezechiel states (Ez. 43:7).

But if this is to happen, if our liturgies are to be a

It is in your song and gesture that God saves the world in Jesus.

vision of the Glory of God, both fearful and lifting us up, then it will be because we, the liturgical ministers, have let God use our songs, our gestures, and our words to save His people.

The Easter gift the Risen Jesus gave His disciples and friends was ministry. He gave His friends to each other as He gave His mother to John and John to His mother. And they were to give to each other and to the whole world what Jesus gave them, His very life: All that He was, Body and Soul.

Jesus taught them to be generous with their gifts and talent for the Good of the community. And He assured them that the Holy Spirit would make their work fruitful for the Kingdom. They knew that when they followed the Lord, Jesus was truly among them.

Like Jesus, and at the heart of everything else we do, we liturgical ministers have an awesome obligation to our parishes and to the whole Church. In our prayerful song and gestures of love we become Jesus wooing His Church. Our liturgical prayer is the Spirit inspiring the whole Church.

Our fidelity to thorough preparation and active participation in worship are the arms of God's embrace restoring the thrill of His respect and concern for His people. That is the job description for liturgical planners. That is the awesome love of God for His people.

We know that for generations our liturgies have defined our Church more than theologians or authorities. We know that only when teachings arise from our worship does the Church come alive. Then Christians are moved to act and the Kingdom comes alive. If there are any bad or weak parishes it is because the love song embodied in our liturgical praise has been stilled.

I want you to know that it is through you, through what you do, especially in the liturgical assemblies, that God reveals Himself. It is in your song and gesture that God saves the world in Jesus.

In the Liturgy we are the event of God's unfolding His plan to save the world. Therefore, whatever we do, how we sing, and the materials we use in our Liturgy are important. These are the ways God works to save us.

Although ultimately whatever is done God does, yet if our music is trite, and our words trivial and our gestures imperceptible, then God's revelation is being obscured if not thwarted.

We can never let ourselves become observers, merely standing back and arranging the externals of Liturgy. A good liturgical minister does not simply perform the rite by saying all the words and doing all the actions. Rather our responsibility is to help people find what they come to church to find, an experience

of God.

The documents of the II Vatican Council are clear; the laity are not being asked to serve the liturgical ministries because our priests are overworked or overextended, but because you are the fundamental resources in the Liturgy. You are the primary symbol of Christ's presence in the assembly.

Many lay people in the Church still question whether they are capable of assuming the responsibilities of the liturgical ministries. Unfortunately many believe that Liturgy is the domain of ordained priests alone, the religious "professionals."

However, if all Christians are baptized into sharing the responsibility for Jesus' mission, as indeed you are, then our Christian profession of faith allows for no "non-professionals."

All of us are called to be ministers, servants of the one Father and Teacher, the one Messiah, Our Lord, Jesus.

Finally, before we blame our congregations, or our ministers, for bad Liturgy we first must confront the liturgies being offered to them.

If our congregations are not satisfied and show it by not participating in the Liturgy, then perhaps that Liturgy does not reflect their most basic needs, and an experience of the Risen Lord.

When we return home our first effort should be to open ourselves humbly to listen once again to what our fellow Christians are saying. We are first of all servants and we cannot serve if we do not listen to what is needed.

I do not need to add that this will not be easy. Often we have to listen to what lies just behind the words and groans that are most audible. And we must be cautious not merely to address a mediocre middle, but to challenge and provoke those who prefer to simply get by on their obligation.

Yet, be confident in the knowledge that you are serving Christians who, in so many ways, are hungering for a full and dynamic experience of God.

What you do does serve the rest. Yours is that service Father Henri Nouwen calls "A service rendered out of love and with a deep respect for the person served, after the model of Jesus."

Your special service as liturgical ministers is never self-seeking, but, in that eternal moment of our liturgical praise, brings love, relieves pain and fear, and enriches our lives from the spring of the Father's own love revealed in Jesus.

Our efforts this weekend have been successful if in some way we have renewed this spirit of liturgical ministry within our Church.

Our goal together is to encourage people to bring their whole lives, knowledge and talents, skills and hopes, creativity and love, enthusiasm and humor, to the service of Christians gathered in worship.

If you want to know if this is really possible, or worth the effort, look around. The answer is sitting next to you.

More Opinions

Little Praise For Pope Paul

Editor: The recent Courier-Journal issue concerning the pope's death thoroughly disgusted me. Pope Paul VI had his good points, but in no way deserved the praise he got in that issue. Little mention was made of the serious problems the pope has caused by some of his teachings. The birth control ban alone alienated

many people from the Church. If theologians and Church scholars cannot find a basis to lift the ban, then alternatives must be found.

The section on Catholic education was very abstract and said little. Painting a rosy picture of Catholic schools fools no one. While Catholic schools may have definite strengths, they also have weaknesses that must be faced and corrected.

I hope people realize that constructive criticism of the system when needed can be a high form of loyalty. Stress the good

points, but don't attempt to hide the bad points or pretend they don't exist. Otherwise, we cannot expect to grow as individuals and as a community.

James Crist
730 Eastwood Circle
Webster, N.Y. 14580

Original Sin The Topic

Editor:

While glancing through the Aug. 23 Courier-Journal, I was inescapably drawn to Msgr. Shannon's

column "The Problem of Original Sin." After reading it, I was truly fascinated at how he arrived at his absurd notion of Original Sin. According to his belief it is something we are born into and not, as the Catholic Church teaches, something we acquire through human generation. Does he think it is something contagious as a virus, or something infectious from our polluted atmosphere? Does he think it is a result of a socio-economic deficiency? Does he think at all? Apparently not. And this is precisely what fascinated

me: there is no reason whatever given for his notion of Original Sin. It is purely volitional. Or, in plain English, simply wishful thinking.

Msgr. Shannon and others of his persuasion never give us any reasoning for what they adduce. But when you attack, no matter how subtly, a solemn definition of the Church with simply your own wishes, you have to wait and observe that the sandy foundation you are standing upon will soon be around your ears. And that is certainly no

way to impress anybody.

The Catholic Church, which rests firmly upon a Rock, teaches all that is necessary for salvation. On Original Sin she is most lucid. In the quite lengthy declaration "Decree on Original Sin," which was solemnly defined at the Council of Trent, June 17, 1546, the Church infallibly states that Original Sin "is communicated to all men by propagation not by imitation." (Paragraph 3).

William D. Morgan Sr.
2060 West Side Drive
Rochester, N.Y. 14624