

What we do at Mass is what we could be doing on the outside

By Cindy Liebhart

Two years ago, a multicultural program in Catholic schools of the Cleveland diocese brought fourth-graders from a predominantly white suburban area and children from a

predominantly black inner-city area together to celebrate Mass. In preparation for the Mass, teachers told the children that to call God "Father" meant they were all brothers and sisters, and that approaching the altar meant they should be willing to hold each other's hands.

Not surprisingly, the children were enthusiastic, unafraid and receptive of one another. The liturgy was both warm and expressive.

An unexpected result of this liturgy, however, was that parents came to a sudden, new understanding of the meaning of the Mass. An awareness stirred in them that the Eucharist calls people to be one family — but not just within church walls.

They began to examine their own fears. Many started to search for ways in which they could translate this new understanding into action in their own lives.

Benedictine Sister Christine Vladimiroff, who was coordinator of the program, spoke with me about it. For her, this experience clearly illustrates the relationship of Christian worship and action on behalf of the world. If that connection is seen, liturgy has the power to transform not only individuals, but society itself.

"We celebrate togetherness

around the table, but when we go out we must be painfully aware that there are people who are not always welcome everywhere," said Sister Vladimiroff, who now serves as secretary for education in the Diocese of Cleveland.

Similarly, we exchange greetings of peace at Mass. But one glance at the daily newspaper tells us our world is far from that reality.

"Our worship coexists in a world that is unjust, where evidence of sin is all around," Sister Vladimiroff said. During Mass we celebrate what already has been accomplished — delivery from slavery into freedom, from death into life. But "we also are given a hint of what still needs to be accomplished," she explained.

"Liturgy keeps that vision alive. It is a source of energy, direction and wisdom."

The liturgy is not a political rally, Sister Vladimiroff said. Still, the readings, prayers, songs and actions at Mass powerfully remind people of the call to create social conditions that make it evident God is with humanity.

As a church that worships, "we are working to bring about the kingdom, that is, working for justice. What we do during Mass is what it could look like on the outside," she said.

Benedictine Sister Mary Collins also sees that the call to work for justice stems directly from the memory of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus — what is celebrated in the Eucharist. Christians see through Jesus how God's action to set things right in the world is carried out, said Sister Collins. She heads the Department of Religion and Religious Education at the Catholic University of America.

But this is also a "dangerous memory" for us, she explained. "We want to go to Eucharist to feel good, comforted and protected." But the eucharistic celebration signals that "contrary to expectations, God does not protect his chosen ones from suffering."

For her, the eucharistic cup suggests that the call to work for justice might require sacrifice and suffering.

Jesus asks, "Can you drink of the cup I am to drink of?" Trying to answer that question in the affirmative can lead people to look at the ways in which they could offer themselves for the well-being of others — their families, their communities and their world," she said.

(Ms. Liebhart is on the staff of Faith Today.)

the real question

the covenant, to be poured out on behalf of many" (Mark 14:24).

The accounts speak of the offering of Christ's blood in connection with his sacrifice on the cross and the establishing of a new covenant — the forming of a new community, a new people of God (see also Matthew 26:28; 1 Corinthians 11:25).

The scripture background is a reason why the Second Vatican Council could say of the liturgy: "The goal is that all who are made children of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his church, to take part in the sacrifice and to eat the Lord's Supper."

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FOOD...

...for thought

True or false? How would you judge the following statement?

"The Sunday Mass begins when the servers, readers and priest process to the altar; it concludes when, together, they depart from the altar after the final Mass prayers."

Could the answer be true and false?

The Mass does have specific points for beginning and concluding. Yet it doesn't conclude the way other events in life conclude — like classes or ballgames or workdays.

Part of the mystery of the Mass is how it continues — how it connects with the whole of life.

But what does this really mean? What are the connections of liturgy and life?

Consider, for one thing, how the Mass appeals not just to people's minds, their thinking — though it does that too. It appeals to Christians as whole persons — people with goals and aspirations, people with hopes and needs.

The Mass is meant to be the kind of prayer that helps shape lives. It:

- fosters hopes;
- refreshes perspectives on life;
- nourishes the ability to enter into the lives of others;
- casts light on the connec-

tions among people.

In such ways — and in other ways too — it gets into the center of life. It reaches into all of life.

To explain the connection of liturgy and life, some think it helps to speak of the vision of life the liturgy reflects. The liturgy points toward humanity's fullest potential — toward what could be. At the same time, it intends to remind all those present of what they already are and of what this means.

Some experts think that to capture the connection of liturgy and life, it is valuable to think of the liturgy itself as a means by which Christ's work in the world continues. Some characteristics of Christ's work, they would add, are the work of healing others who are broken, nourishing others who hunger and reaching out to the whole world.

This, then, is the kind of "work" that gets under way when priest and servers and readers process to the altar on Sunday. Of course, it is the kind of work that doesn't conclude when the final prayers of the Mass do.

It is the kind of "work" that continues in the efforts of Christians to heal and nourish the world and its people.

...for discussion

Christ in each person. This week, our writers indicate that it is a purpose of the Sunday Mass — of the church's liturgy — to transform people. Why does the Mass do this?

1. On the front page of this week's Faith Today, Katharine Bird tells a true story about a woman in Guatemala who wept over the kernels of corn she had lost. Ms. Bird turns to the symbolism of the eucharistic bread — Christ's body — as nourishment, and finds in light of that symbolism that the Eucharist points toward the Guatemalan woman and her hunger. What kinds of "hungers" are found in the world around you? Do you agree that the nourishing Eucharist points Christians toward people who suffer because of their special needs?

2. The Sunday Mass is prayer. Ms. Bird's article seems to indicate that prayer and action for the world can be closely related. How do you see the connection of prayer and action?

3. Prayer changes people. Sister Christine Hope Allen, RSM, an occasional writer in these pages, once suggested that in prayer, people are liable to find themselves transformed in some way and better able to carry out their responsibilities...to see

SECOND HELPINGS

"Mother Teresa of Calcutta: The Love of Christ," edited by Georges Gorree and Jean Barbier. "Our Eucharist is incomplete if it does not make us love and serve the poor," says Mother Teresa in this book — a book about the Nobel Peace Prize winner whose way of making peace through her work among the poor in India is known throughout the world. The book organizes words drawn from her speeches, letters and other statements about the work she pursues and its meaning. The link of prayer and action in the life of Mother Teresa, who views the poor as God's gift, comes into view here. (Harper and Row, 10 E. 53rd St., New York, NY 10022. \$7.95)