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Formation for Liturgical Ministries: What's My Motivation?

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"What's my motivation here?" An actor rehearsing his or her part in a play might ask that question of the director. The script may call for the actor to say certain words, to perform a particular action, or to relate to another character in a specific way. But to properly play his or her part, the actor needs to know how the words should be spoken, what emotion should accompany the action, and how he or she should treat the other characters in the scene. The actor needs to know what is motivating the character he or she is playing. The actor needs to understand the character's personality and appreciate how the character relates to the entire story; otherwise, the audience will perceive that the actor is just mouthing words, just going through the motions, just following a script. The actor will not truly bring the character to life.

Just consider that a high school production of *Hamlet* and a Broadway production of the same play featuring Kenneth Branagh and Derek Jacobi both have exactly the same script by William Shakespeare. What makes the difference between the two productions is how the actors bring the characters to life. Kenneth Branagh and Derek Jacobi understand the story. They know

the characters they are playing. They know their motivations. They know their characters as surely as they know themselves. Therefore, when they move across the stage, we see Hamlet, not Kenneth Branagh making believe he is the ill-fated prince. We see King Claudius, not Derek Jacobi trying to mimic a murderous monarch. Actors with motivation, understanding, appreciation, and talent bring a play to life.

At this point, you may be asking how any of this relates to the formation of those seeking to serve in liturgical ministries. I believe there is a relationship, a strong one.

When someone steps forward to serve as a reader, extraordinary minister of Holy Communion, altar server, cantor, psalmist, choir member, organist, usher, greeter, minister of hospitality, or priest or deacon, preparation is required. Those wishing to serve in a liturgical ministry need to learn what they will be expected to do during the celebration of Mass. For example, those who wish to serve as readers or lectors must learn how to find the assigned readings in the Lectionary; the proper way to carry the Book of the Gospels in the opening procession and where to place that

book on the altar; when to approach the pulpit for the first reading, the second reading, and the Prayer of the Faithful; how to project their voices to be heard and clearly understood by the congregation; and what position they should take in the recessional.

The same is true for those who exercise any liturgical ministry. They need to learn what to do and what to say as they fulfill their special role during the celebration. This training should teach them their basic "script" and acquaint them with their "directions." But such basic training is not sufficient.

Just as an actor needs more than a script and stage directions to bring the role to life, so, too, do liturgical ministers. Those serving at the altar need to have an understanding of the liturgy, an appreciation of their particular ministry and its relationship to the other ministries at Mass, and a willingness to give of their time and talent for the glory of God and for the sake of the assembly. Finally, liturgical ministers need to have the proper motivation. Without this understanding, liturgical ministers will simply go through the motions like actors who do not appreciate or understand the roles they are playing. This is not to say that liturgical ministers are actors, that the liturgy is a theatrical production, or that the sanctuary is a stage. However, there are things we can learn from accomplished actors that can help us discern elements that should be part of the formation and training of those who wish to exercise a liturgical ministry.

To begin with, liturgical ministers need to understand the Mass. We generally assume that people who step forward to offer their time and talent as

liturgical ministers have a basic understanding of the Mass. Yet this is not true. For many people, the Mass seems to be a series of unrelated actions and rituals that eventually culminate in the consecration and the reception of Holy Communion. During this ritual, which they consider primarily the work of the priest, they believe they can participate in the spoken and sung prayer as they choose, or they can simply remain silent, caught up in their own thoughts and private prayers.

Those who offer their time and talent as liturgical ministers should be helped to understand that "the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows" (Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [Sacrosanctum Concilium]*, no. 10, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996]). In other words, they need to realize that the Church is most fully alive when she celebrates the liturgy, and it is the liturgy that brings the Church most fully to life.

Nothing Catholics do is more important than celebrating the liturgy. If anyone needs proof of that, just consider what happens when a parish suffers a natural disaster, as happened in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. On the Sunday immediately following such a disaster, a parish will marshal all its remaining resources so that Mass may be celebrated; so that God's Word of hope may be proclaimed; so that hurting hearts can feed on the Bread and Cup of Life; so that the Church, the living Body of Christ, may show itself

even in the midst of darkness and confusion.

Liturgical ministers need to “understand that the Eucharist is the mystery in which Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is perpetuated; that it is a memorial of Christ’s passion, death and Resurrection; and that it is a sacred banquet in which the People of God share the benefits of the Paschal Mystery, renew the covenant that God has made through the blood of Christ, and anticipate the heavenly banquet” (*National Directory for Catechesis* [NDC] [Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005], no. 36. Those being formed to serve as liturgical ministers also need to understand the basic structure of the Mass. They need to see the Mass as the primary way the Church gives praise and thanks to God; to appreciate the importance of Sunday; to recognize the ways Christ is present in the Mass; and to realize that, in receiving Holy Communion, we become what we receive, namely, “a holy communion” sent forth to transform the world.

Such an understanding of the Mass does not happen at one time, in one training session, or even during a series of classes. It happens over time. There needs to be an “ongoing catechesis for the faithful.” There needs to be “lifelong catechesis” (NDC, no. 35). This is especially true for those who exercise special roles in the liturgy. The more such ministers understand and appreciate the Mass, the more they truly pray the Mass. The more they pray the Mass, the more their prayerfulness and evident love of the liturgy are an inspiration to others. Such ongoing catechesis requires that a parish or institution provide regular

opportunities for adult learning and formation, such as lectures, days of recollection, updating sessions, Scripture sharing, and other similar activities. At this time, such catechesis also should include information concerning the Third Edition of the *Roman Missal* that is mandated for use beginning November 27, 2011.

Those who desire to exercise a liturgical ministry must come to understand why they do what they do during the liturgy and how their actions relate to the assembly and their fellow ministers. Such understanding needs to be part of the formation of all liturgical ministers. For example, it is not enough for ushers, collectors, or ministers of hospitality to know they are responsible for “finding seats” and “passing the basket.” Such ministers must see themselves as those charged with the responsibility of recognizing their fellow Christians, not just as part of a crowd but as part of the living Body of Christ assembled to hear God’s Word and to share his life. Such ministers must see themselves as challenging others to greater generosity by their own example of giving and by the manner and attitude they show as they gather the financial offerings of the people.

Formation for liturgical ministry must also include an examination of motivation. Those who exercise special roles in the liturgy should be motivated above all by a love of God and a love of neighbor. As Jesus tells us, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the

prophets depend on these two commandments" (Mt 22:37-40). That such love entails service and sacrifice is clearly demonstrated by Jesus on Holy Thursday and Good Friday.

His love for his disciples leads him to wash their feet at the Last Supper. Jesus, the Lord and Master, humbles himself in service and tells his disciples, "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (Jn 13:34). Then on Good Friday, Jesus lays down his life in service to sinners and proclaims that his love for the Father is even greater than his love for life. He gives his Body and Blood and tells us, "Do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19).

Those who serve as liturgical ministers need to be motivated above all by a desire to imitate the love and service of Jesus Christ. Whether bishop, priest, or deacon; whether extraordinary minister of Holy Communion or reader; whether music director, leader of song, or choir member; whether altar server, greeter, or minister of hospitality, all need the proper motivation if they are to bring their ministry to life. They need to be motivated by the example of Jesus Christ who "did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28).

Above all else, the formation for liturgical ministers needs to instill the proper motivation. Once that motivation is there, all else will follow.

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