

Five Liturgical Assumptions That Should Govern Our Church In Today's World
Richard N. Fragomeni, *Come to the Light: an invitation to baptism and confirmation*

- 1. The liturgy is an act of human communication that speaks deeply the Divine Mystery.**
- 2. Liturgy is an action of the entire baptized community.**
- 3. God doesn't need the liturgy.
We do.**
- 4. As we pray, so we believe.**
- 5. The liturgy is God's living word, and in that living word, everything is transformed for those who are open to its power.**

The following pages share some insights on each of these five assumptions.

1. The liturgy is an act of human communication that speaks deeply the Divine Mystery.

We need the sacraments to bring us into deeper communion with God and each other, we need them in a deeply human language. This human language is the language of symbols.

The word symbol comes from a Greek word meaning “thrown together.” You sort of “catch” a symbol or you don’t. You catch it with your whole person, not just mind or emotions.

We all communicate symbolically all the time. We are wired to receive symbolic communication and we get this communication through all our sensory channels.

In the presence of sights and sounds and smells and touch and motion, we are inspired to desire to change, to love and to know. Symbolic language awakens our desire for God.

In the presence of symbols, we begin to create visions of what reality should be. We stimulate little babies with colors, shapes and textures so they learn to know and love life. We stimulate our own faith life in the same way. With symbols liturgy really creates a map of the possible. It creates a map of the spiritual world. It is a multi-textured, many-colored inner map, rich in sound and motion that we call a *worldview*.

You might say that with our imagination we try to make sense out of our sensory information. Our desire to know where we are and where we are going is activated. We develop an imagination and with this imagination, we reach for God. We live out of the worldview our imagination has created.

We structure a world in which what is good/bad, true/false, real/unreal, healthy/unhealthy and all our other values are located. From these value assessments, we make our decisions. From our decisions, flow our behavior. Our behavior creates community and the fulfillment that comes with it. If the symbols are rich and strong, they create an alternative worldview to the consumerist society. They create a longing for another kind of life, another set of values, another map of a possible world under the influence of the Spirit. They create a longing for the Kingdom of God.

We are created for the kind of communion these symbols inform us of and call us to. Liturgy is all about the communion of saints—people with people and people with God. So the goal is not aesthetic liturgy or age-appropriate understanding of doctrine. The goal is a church that is acting out God’s love for the world. The goal of the liturgy is to create a church of justice, mercy and life for the world.

God doesn't work magically from "out there." God works through sacramental signs. The movement of God works in a community in a sacramental system. The signs are familiar: bread, wine, oil and water but the prime symbol is the assembly of the community. That's where and through whom God speaks. Where our symbols are shoddy and our community half there, the music uninteresting and readers mumble, God simply is not revealed and can't work. When we don't work, God doesn't work. Full, active, conscious participation is not a luxury option. It is the pulse of community life. It says that the community is alive and available to do God's work.

2. Liturgy is an action of the entire baptized community.

Clerics don't do it for the people. It is not a clerical performance for the assembly. This is a life giving symbolic exchange of the people present that activates desire and changes behavior. All baptized people have the duty of full, active, conscious participation. Musicians, readers, parents, friends, ministers—all have duties in the assembly and during the week to see that the liturgy is active and effective. Then God is present.

Regis Duffy has observed wryly, "**God's real presence is always there, the problem is our real absence.**"

Each parish has its own problems and genius, and each must find faith and life according to its own spirit.

3. God doesn't need the liturgy. We do.

It is a gift. It is an aid to find peace. Ronald Grimes puts it this way, "We do what we do in the liturgy in the hope that God will do something to us. We do what we do as the assembly baptized, in this act of communication, in the hopes that God will do something in the middle of our doing it. We do liturgy because we need the gift God wishes to offer."

We should rethink our Sunday obligation. We need to be there, not to avoid offending God, but rather we need to be there for one another.

4. As we pray, so we believe.

More than any catechism or school, we communicate our faith in the way we celebrate liturgy. The way we touch and sing and read communicates our faith—for better or worse. The liturgy activates our desire for God on a deeper level than any merely intellectual, didactic presentation can.

5. The liturgy is God's living word, and in that living word, everything is transformed for those who are open to its power.

For the liturgy to be really human communication, it must be of the culture of the people. We call this *enculturation*. Enculturation is tricky and can go off track. Enculturation is required because we need to be able to understand and respond to the symbols. Because symbols are powerful, we use them with care.

In North America, some of our cultural habits and assumptions are destructive, as is our extreme individualism and or frenetic pace. Symbols that communicate these values have not place in the liturgy.

The liturgy practiced with these attitudes can become diabolical rather than symbolical. Symbolical means to bring together; diabolical means to tear apart. When our liturgy communicates non-welcome, bigotry, injustice, exclusivity and isolation, it is diabolical.

Liturgy itself must be examined in the light of the gospel. Culture must be critiqued. The church must be more than culture while being of the culture.

Liturgy finds its fulfillment as the source and summit of Christian life in worship. Worship is not the same as liturgy. Liturgy is the sacramental symbolic activity of a community in which it receives and yields to the gift of God. It does so by thanks and praise. Worship is how much all that liturgy is worth to us. The true worship of the church is the activity of social justice and life in the world.

We render God praise by pouring out our lives in service and compassion for the world. We renew the liturgy in order to renew the face of the earth. The gift we receive in the liturgy isn't complete until we in turn give it away. That's the worship of God.