

## REV. MSGR. KEVIN W. IRWIN

It has been said that there are three ages in life --- youth, middle age and “you’re looking wonderful.” I want to begin by thanking the many of you who have told me that I was “looking wonderful.” While some of you may want to have your eyeglasses checked, I do thank you for your very warm welcome.

When John Burton called me aside just before the meeting of the Bishops’ Committee on Divine Worship last November last year to inform me that I would receive this award I was completely stunned. In fact, Rita Thiron witnessed the eighth wonder of the world – I was speechless. And if you know me at all that is a rare occurrence! I was, however, able to recover enough to participate in the meeting that followed fully and consciously!

Now imagine that annual meeting. Assembled are between eight and ten hierarchs, seven to ten lowerarchs, Powerpoints, iPads, cellphones, laptops, screens, an overly abundant served lunch, three coffee breaks all in play from 9 to 5 on a Sunday, the Dies Domini. Among us this evening is Sr. Janet Baxendale, SC from the Sisters of Charity and also Archdiocese of New York, someone well known to very many of you. Janet and I enjoyed several summers together at Notre Dame earning our Masters degrees in Liturgy. Beginning next fall we will be at the same table of the USCCB CDW as consultants for the next three years on the second Sundays in November. The Bible tells us that the Sabbath is a day like any other. Welcome, Janet, to at least three that I can assure you will be unlike any other! There is a neon sign in the window of a shopping center just outside of the city gates of Jerusalem. It reads “24/6.” At least for those USCCB weeks for the next three years it will be “24/7.5!”

Last year’s recipient, my friend Paul Turner, said “you’ve got the wrong guy.” I feel very much the same. You need to know how humbled and honored I am by this award, named after the giant of a man and peritus before, at and after Vatican II. In August 1977, I met Fred McManus for the first time at the Societas Liturgica Congress in Cambridge, UK during which he took me and another student from Sant’Anselmo, Archbishop Wilton Gregory to dinner. I had just finished my doctorate and Archbishop Gregory was two years away. One never forgets such outstanding acts of generosity by someone as rightly esteemed and emulated as Fred McManus. Eight years later the same Fred McManus would sign my first contract at CUA in his role as Academic Vice President of CUA. I have held and been advanced in that teaching position for thirty years. But, as Stephen Sondheim wrote “I’m still here.” Yes, even after stepping down as the Dean three years ago. Some people ask whether I am still at CUA. All I did was step down as the Dean, I did not leave my teaching position. As I often say, in the academic life the only thing better than tenure is inherited wealth. And the only thing better than being the Dean is being for former Dean.

The priest scholar is a dying breed. Because of clergy shortages bishops and religious superiors have not had nor do they have the priests to send to graduate studies. Fred McManus was an outstanding priest scholar and always a gracious gentleman even when one might have differences of opinion. He was a role model to many.

When I was hired at CUA I was the Benjamin of the Liturgy faculty. There were the giants, Walter Schmitz, Fred McManus, Kevin Seasoltz, David Power, Mary Collins and Gerard Austin. Given retirements and recent deaths I judge that I am now somewhere between Abraham and Melchizedek. But then again there is great consolation in the Sondheim lyric “I’m still here.” I love what I do and when you are in the “you’re looking wonderful” time of your life the best thing the doctor can say to you is “keep on doing what you are doing!” I am and intend to, for as long as the Lord grants me the energy and the insight. At least as long as it takes to revise Context and Text, which I will begin doing next spring when I will teach at Sant’Anselmo in Rome for the semester.

As I look around this room I am both heartened and humbled by the presence of so many former students from CUA and Notre Dame in summers, and yes even as far back as Rome. I salute them because their questions and class participation helped (and still help) me “sharpen the pencil” on my ideas about the liturgy. I think of the recently ordained priest here from Louisiana who took the course on “Ordained Ministries.” The priest here whose doctoral dissertation I directed. The liturgy directors of three dioceses who told me just today how important my summer course at Notre Dame was in their training. I think of the director of worship for a diocese whose artful touch helped to shape the renovation of the diocesan cathedral and the ordination liturgy of a new bishop. I think of a priest pastor here who oversaw the construction of two churches in his time, the second of which almost did him in (as all of you can well imagine!).

In the end there are two lenses through which I view the liturgy – theological and spiritual. I came to that rather obvious insight when the GIRM warfare about the revised text was firing on all sides. Sandy DeMasi invited to present and discuss at a study day for liturgical commission and liturgy office members from New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Rubrical changes abounded. I tried to argue that underlying those changes was what really mattered, the always amazing and life changing action of our redemption in and through the liturgy. Each and every word we say, every gesture we engage in and every artifact we use in the liturgy has a theological meaning. Understanding that and continuing to be immersed in them in the liturgy comes first and foremost. The rubrics follow.

My experience of the liturgy is academic and pastoral. Ever since coming to CUA I have been resident in parishes and then later week end assisting clergy. In one of those parishes I assisted for over a decade and drove to and from Richmond to do that. (I now assist in the neighboring parish.) When that happens children you baptize receive First Eucharist, those who graduate high school get married, those whom you have anointed once or several times at communal services are buried with the church’s rites. And during all of that you were a part of their lives, and they a part of yours. If I did and do not walk down those center aisles Sunday after Sunday, preside and preach in the same place Sunday after Sunday I judge that Monday to Friday at the university would have become rarefied air. Liturgy is about the pulsating heart of the church – with all of our flaws, weaknesses and our need for the God we worship. We do this together.

Cardinal Spellman was the archbishop of New York from 1939-67, during which time he penned (or had assistance in penning!) several books. One day a priest friend from Boston was visiting

Spellman and they took a walk on Fifth Avenue. The cardinal asked his friend “have you read my last book?” To which the priest replied, “I hope so!”

In my latest book, *What We Have Done What We Have Failed To Do*, I began and ended by saying that it is important to raise the important questions even if you do not have all the answers. When I lectured at the Southwest Liturgical Conference last January Roseanne Belpedio asked me to deepen the conversation I began in that book. Allow me to further that conversation tonight and raise the question of what is the Pope Francis effect on the liturgy?

I ask this as many blogs trash the Holy Father’s approach liturgy as being pedestrian and matter of fact compared with Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. I have argued more than once that one of the lamented effects of the implementation of the post Vatican II liturgy has been a separation between liturgy and justice. I also lament that sometimes permanent deacons wind up not bridging that gap the way deacons did in the early church. My own sense is that Pope Francis wants us all to be permanent deacons and to minister both in our churches and in our public squares. Allow me to offer three thoughts.

#### *The Poor.*

If there is one thing which this pope is concerned about it is world poverty, hunger and the conspicuous consumption of wealth by the comparatively few. When the pope’s critiques of trickle down economics and unregulated free markets are countered by opposing ideologues then we know that the two edged sword of the scriptures has gratefully not become a butter knife. The pope views wealth through the lens of an Argentinian whose economy defaulted twice in thirteen years and whose unemployment rate is higher than ours but which was 20% in the recent past. There is more than some irony in the fact the second default for Argentina was not well covered in the American press at the end of July when the Dow was breaking 17,000.

Fifteen years ago in the archdiocese of Washington its leaders realized that many Latinos were not getting married in the church because it cost too much in terms of church fees for the very poor but also the cultural assumptions that come from trying to be inculturated into American ways, that is the cost of receptions. One parish in Silver Spring, Maryland decided to sponsor group weddings with collective receptions held in the parish hall.

What must Pope Francis think about the absolute immorality of destination weddings? And I do mean to say absolute immorality. Weddings, like all sacraments, are meant to be celebrations that deepen our relationship with God in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit in the communion of the part of God’s church to which we belong and to which we are committed. By definition a destination wedding means most family and friends cannot attend and those who can will spend thousands of dollars that could be spent on paying off student loans, on mortgage payments and, yes, for the poor. Just because we can do something financially does not mean that we should do it. And what kind of Keepsake diamond ring notion of marriage do we nurture when the goal is to be marred near a villa under the Tuscan sun, or on a generic beach, on a generic island, in the cool breeze of a cloudless evening, with a generic minister presiding, under the tutelage of the ever present wedding coordinator or coordinatrix at scandalously high amounts of money never to be seen again. And after the Tuscan sun wedding there is jet leg and bills to be paid. And

after the trip back from the sunlit Caribbean the couple realizes that it does rain, and it snows, and there are winds and storms in every life. How prepared are they for marriage when the focus has been an outrageous amount of money spent on themselves for a wedding day, or, these days in America, the wedding triduum? George Clooney is not the only one who spent three days getting married!

### *Unity and Peace*

Aidan Kavanagh taught us well when he indicated that the prayers over the offerings often asked for the “unity and peace” of the church and that the Eucharistic Prayers did the same. Why? Because we have not yet achieved or experienced that.

In what was one of his last acts in office Cardinal Canizares was received in audience by Pope Francis and received papal approval for the circular letter on the sign of peace. The reaction in the USA was one more liturgy skirmish with the blogs undertaking predictable critiques, pro, con and outrage on the extreme left and right. The issue seemed to come down to whether one was a rubricist or a romantic. Once more what should unite us – the liturgy – is what divides us. Is there really anything more scandalous than that? In the end and the last time I checked it was and is always an extraordinary experience of amazing and abiding grace.

As for unity, how often has the pope challenged our gossip, our ecclesiastical in house haggling, the careerism that sometimes obsesses church leaders eager to get ahead on career paths rather than to pray that God would shine on those who dwell in darkness, and to guide us on the ways of peace and the paths of justice and righteousness.

But rather than get involved in a rubrical war about whom to embrace at the sign of peace and what to say at Mass, this pope travelled to Jerusalem in late May and then hosted a peace summit at the Vatican in mid-June. That is the forum he has chosen and from which he leads us. This is a big picture pope with world class ideas and ideals.

Part of peacemaking is belonging together and wanting to be. I wonder whether in the American culture of “believers not belongers” our sacramental practice might not feed into a believer, not a belonger culture? If we so emphasize individual choices in the RCIA, infant baptism, confirmation and marriage, then what happens when we have not engaged them in preparation and celebration in belonging, not just individual faith professing? I think Timothy Gabrielli is right to ask the question in his fine new book about confirmation, subtitled “how did a sacrament about God become all about us?” Is one of the ways we might have done this inadvertently is by emphasizing (Wednesday) evening faith sharing processes and ignored a sacramental catechesis about what it means to belong to a sacramental and liturgical church, where prayers, rites, signs, and gestures all matter, and in fact are the heart of the matter. Ours is a church about theology and liturgy, it is not a clique of like-minded individuals who choose to belong because we like other.

I wonder whether much of our sacramental practice 180 degrees off? Should it not be about deeper commitment to believing in a community of faith that transcends color, gender, political affiliation, age and orientation. What does “no more Jew, Greek, slave and free” mean in a

sacramental church that allows destination weddings and emphasizes choosing sacraments? Is the presumption the same as in our culture, “you are special” and “whatever you feel comfortable with.” This sounds like cheap, self-serving grace, not the amazing grace that changes and challenges minds and hearts.

*Unfussy.*

In this final section I simply want to assert what I think most of us have observed in the celebration of the liturgy by Pope Francis. There is directness, a focus, a profound sense of purpose in what he is about by the way he presides. He is not in any way theatrical. His prayerfulness is rather contemplative when presiding. When preaching he generates enthusiasm by the way he invites you into what he is saying and doing. And before you know it the terms of the immigration debate presented by MSNBC, FOX and countless stations in between those political stances and the caricatures about “free market capitalism” versus “communism” are transcended in the face of his preaching about Matthew 25, and gospel challenges like that whose images and likenesses are the imprisoned, the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the alien.

The pope observes ritual and rubrics. But he also observes what is right and invites us to ever deeper conversion, not to the liturgy but to the triune God, with all that that says and means.

I would hope that this de-emphasis on externals might lead us to gossip less about the size and color of his pallium, the design of his crozier, whether he should preach standing up, the angle of the six candles on the altar or the length of the lace on the surplices of his masters of ceremonies.

I am ready for Whispers in the Loggia to get laryngitis on those issues and to keep on publishing homilies and statements that are about the real liturgy in daily life.

I am ready for an end to the liturgy wars and want to follow the pope who invites us to raise our voices to defend the poor and to share signs and actions of peace outside the walls of our sacred assemblies.

I am ready for second collections about the right to life to be shared among those working for adequate clean water allocation, post natal care, equitable food distribution and elder advocacy.

I am ready for a church that is Catholic to be true to its heritage of liturgies and all that they mean and not to seek security in religiously inspired self-help groups.

I am ready to invite us all to lose ourselves in rituals and symbols that defy explanation and which are the ways we share in the very life of God.

I am ready to invite us to ask fewer questions about how the daily and Sunday liturgy was conducted (the question “how did it go?”) and to probe more deeply what effect it did and does it have in the church’s witness in the world to the values and reality we dare to share in through the liturgy, with and in God and each other, 24/7.

I am ready for fewer debates about whether our liturgical participation is activa or actuosa, and more prayer-filled discussions about how, where and when we participate actively and with full consciousness in serving the poor and the ostracized.

I am ready for more life challenging and life changing preaching about working so that our society's structures might reflect God's justice, not the injustice of unfettered free market practices which make the rich richer, the poor much poorer and the middle class less in the middle and more towards the bottom.

I am ready for less GIRM warfare and more warring on poverty and injustice.

I am ready for fewer liturgy police reporting on infractions of the rubrics, especially when Pope Francis himself has been the object of letters to the Vatican about not following rubrical protocols jot and tittle when he washed the feet of Muslim women in prison and more self-imposed policing of the way we wash feet, serve meals, visit the sick and revere the dying.

It's all of a piece, I think. If it is not then we are no better than Scribes, Pharisees and the lawyers in the gospel who miss the forest for the trees.

In effect everyone here, with gifts and talents, and more years than anyone can count implementing the revised liturgy, needs to realize that one goal of the liturgy is to put us out of a job! Liturgy is the privileged place where we are drawn again and again into the mystery of the Triune God. But it is always provisional -- maranatha indeed. At my "you're looking wonderful" time of life I am looking forward to what the Wesleys text prays: "Lord, at length, when sacraments shall cease..."

But until then we have the privileged, yet provisional, means to salvation and sanctification called the liturgy, with all of its predictable and unpredictable experiences, meanings and hopefully life changing results.

My own suspicion is that a major lesson we can learn from the Francis effect on the liturgy is that one of the purposes of celebrating the liturgy is not to get the rite right but to get life right, or at least to get life less wrong, no matter your stage of life -- youth, middle age or "you're looking wonderful!" Thank you very much.