

THRICE HOLY: LITURGY, ADORATION, CATECHESIS

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It is surely an honor for me to accept this 2015 Frederick R. McManus Award from you, the members of the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions. I cordially thank you for it. At the same time, I truly believe that such awards are rarely given for singular efforts; they are, indeed, a recognition of the cooperation of many. My receiving this award from you tonight is assuredly a validation of this view. I have participated in your annual meeting for many years. I have published several texts with you. I have given numerous conferences and workshops in the dioceses you represent. I am surely no stranger to you members of the FDLC. In many ways it is you who have made my liturgical ministry successful over the years. It is you who have helped me minister to so many thousands of people over the years. It is you who have shown me the needs, the fruits, and the grace of liturgical ministry. Through my interactions with so many of you, I have learned, grown, relearned, and grown some more. And I presume this award attests to the fact that the learning and growing has been two ways.

So often those of us in high profile ministries—those of us responsible for catechizing, writing, praying, nourishing, encouraging, prodding, affirming (that’s seven tasks, a number indicating we actually do everything and anything!)—forget that we ourselves need catechizing, nourishing, encouraging, affirming, thanking. With this in mind, I would like to direct my remarks to you, my friends in the FDLC, offering you a few thoughts that hopefully nourish you personally. To this end, I’ve given these words of gratitude a title: “Thrice Holy: Liturgy, Adoration, Catechesis.”

In the prophet Isaiah’s vision of God “sitting on a throne, high and lofty” one of the Seraphs in attendance “called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD God of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory’ ” (Isa 6:3; NRSV). Thrice holy is God! In the Revelation to John, all “four living creatures . . . without ceasing [] sing, ‘Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come’ ” (Rev 4:8). Thrice holy is God! Every Eucharistic celebration the assembly sings, “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of your glory” (The Roman Missal, no. 84). Thrice holy is God!

But wait, there is more, as the ads on TV often exclaim. In the Holiness Code of the Book of Leviticus (chaps. 17-26), we are commanded by God, “be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:45; see also Lev 20:7 and 26). This command is as bold and demanding as Jesus’ command, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34; also, 15:12). As if this weren’t command enough, in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount Jesus also prods, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). This command to be perfect is something far different from never erring or sinning. Jesus’ command destines us to strive for the fullness and completeness of God, even while we yet struggle in this life to overcome human weakness. We are to live God’s steadfast love, covenantal fidelity, and consummate righteousness. Three commands: be holy, be loving,

be perfect as God is. I suggest that these three are really one: to be holy is to be loving is to be perfect. In other words, we are to be, live, act as God.

If holiness is the essence of God, and we are to be holy, then holiness is the essence of who we are, too. Thrice holy are we! God's holiness is not something that can be seen in itself; it is manifested in glory: the glory of creation, the glory of goodness extended, the glory of love made evident. And God's glory is visible in each of us through striving to love others and do God's will, through patterning our lives after Gospel living, through making God's Presence felt through who we are as the Body of Christ. Our holiness is one gift of our baptismal identity: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. . . . And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body" (Col 3:12, 15), that is, the Body of Christ. Thrice holy are we!

Holiness is not a mere absence of sin (if so, who of us would be holy), nor is it what we earn for ourselves. Holiness is a pure gift of God to those who are loved by God, a love so mighty, so perfect that by it we participate in God's divine being. I want to briefly reflect on three ways we open ourselves to the gift of God's holiness: through Eucharistic liturgy, adoration, and catechesis.

FIRST, THROUGH LITURGY

For all that we teach and do about the Eucharistic liturgy, it is easy for us to forget that we ourselves must continually learn and grow through our own celebrations of liturgy. St. Paul reminds us how we do this: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1). To offer ourselves as a living sacrifice means that we surrender ourselves to being holy, being loving, being perfect. Etymologically, "sacrifice" means to make sacred, to make holy. By offering ourselves to God along with Jesus Christ's own self-offering during liturgy—that is, by surrendering ourselves into God's creative hands—we open ourselves to God's saving action, to God's loving embrace, to God's re-creating work in us. Liturgy transforms us into being ever more perfect images of the God who creates, into being ever more perfect members of the Body of Christ, into being ever more perfect Temples of the Holy Spirit.

Every celebration of the Eucharist is a kind of incarnation—bread and wine are changed into the very Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Ah, but wait, yes there is more! As Christ is incarnated in the bread and wine, so is Christ incarnated in each of us as we receive his continual gift of self-giving. As St. Augustine taught so many centuries ago, we ourselves become that Gift given to us. Let us listen to St. Augustine's words: "If you are the Body of Christ and members of it, then it is that mystery which is placed on the Lord's table: you receive the mystery, which is to say the Body of Christ, your very self. You answer Amen to who you are and in the answer you embrace yourself. You hear Body of Christ and answer Amen. Be a member of Christ's Body, that your Amen will be true" (St. Augustine, Sermon 272; my translation). And what makes our Amen true? Being holy as the Holy Spirit is holy, being loving as Jesus is loving, being perfect as our heavenly Father. Thrice holy are we!

Now we have another command: to live so that the Amen we say to the Body and Blood of Christ is true. To have Christ fruitfully incarnated in us exacts from us the same ongoing self-giving as Christ. We are to love as Christ showed us by his own way of living. This loving is most certainly not the kind of love with which we are bombarded each day through all the various kinds of media—a love marked by self-gratification and glorification of epic proportions. In contrast, Jesus’ love is self-giving made visible. In this self-giving, God’s glory is manifest. Eucharist ultimately incarnates God’s glory.

Eucharist is a sacrament of self-giving love. It ritually rehearses who we are and are to become more fully—the holiness, love, perfection of our Triune God. The celebration of Eucharist is ultimately a most demanding commandment. To celebrate Eucharist with radical truth, self-emptying humility, and unwavering integrity requires that we commit ourselves no less than Mary did with her “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38) and her divine Son did with his “not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). These were no offhand utterances. They cost Mary (“and a sword will pierce your own soul too”; Luke 2:35) and they cost Jesus (“But when [the soldiers] came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out” (John 19:33-34). Doing God’s will—being holy, loving, perfect as is God—costs us our very life.

But wait, yes there is still more! Eucharist brings us through the death of self-giving to a share in risen Life. Self-giving is not about giving up, but about giving over. By saying Amen and making it true by our very way of Gospel living, we show that the selfish self-will bringing on sin and death has no power over us, for our heavenly Father “has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13-14). Thrice holy are we!

Ultimately, Eucharist is a commandment to enter into an intimate love relationship with God, self, and others. Such a self-giving love relationship must be a habit of the heart. This self-giving love is nourished by Eucharist, lived by concern for others, perfected by adoration. Thrice holy are we!

SECOND, WE OPEN OURSELVES TO BEING HOLY THROUGH ADORATION

Eucharistic adoration is our thank you note to God for the gift of the Eucharist, hand-written from our heart and signed with our love, reverence, and awe. It strengthens our relationships, encourages us in self-giving, and prompts a holy exchange of self-giving love.

Too often we limit Eucharistic adoration to being before the Blessed Sacrament (either exposed or not). Offering ourselves “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12:1) at Eucharist readies us for our whole lives being unceasing adoration. Our whole life is to be an extended love affair between God and us that overflows into a love affair between ourselves and others. Life as adoration identifies us with the beloved one in the Song of Songs who seeks her Beloved: “I will seek him whom my soul loves. ... when I found him whom my soul loves, I

held him, and would not let him go ... ” (Song 3:2b, 4a). Adoration is life spent in communion, the beloved losing self in the divine Lover. Adoration is life spent doing the will of the divine Lover and receiving our Lover’s life-giving embrace. Adoration is life spent aligning ourselves interiorly with God so that our external actions express God’s holiness, love, and perfection inhabiting our very being. Adoration is life spent molding ourselves toward fullness of participation in eternal Life.

Adoration is much more than some specific time at prayer. Adoration is a Eucharistic habit of the heart that marks us as different—different because we are holy, loving, and perfect as our Triune God. This is not possible without giving ourselves untiringly over to God. Adoration fosters the kind of relationships that enable dying to become rising, self-giving to become new Life, self-emptying to become exaltation. Yes, thrice holy are we! This holiness is celebrated, lived, and learned.

SO, THIRD, WE OPEN OURSELVES TO BEING HOLY THROUGH CATECHESIS

The word catechesis is a combination of two Greek words translated as “down” and “to sound,” so in other words catechesis is to “sound down,” to hand on, to teach. Mostly, our catechesis tends to be about learning “stuff.” Very often our liturgical catechesis is about imparting information, and sometimes this is necessary. We don’t discount it. But let’s look at catechesis a bit differently, from the purview of being thrice holy.

To “sound down” our being thrice holy has less to do with speaking and everything to do with proclaiming our relationship with God, self, and others through the “sounds” of our holiness, loving, and being perfect. The most thorough and life-changing liturgical catechesis has less to do with teaching doctrine and more to do with living; less to do with imparting knowledge and more to do with enticing others to discover the divine Lover in ever new ways; less to do with word-sounds and more to do with surrender-sounds. To catechize about liturgy we must be practicing liturgists, that is, those who celebrate liturgy, love liturgy, live liturgy with our whole being. Liturgical catechesis begins with our own holy selves loving others into a loving relationship with God.

I am proposing here that catechesis is far deeper than practicing what we preach. Catechesis is a dynamic encounter between catechist as lover and those being catechized as beloved. This dynamic encounter during the process of a catechizing derives from holiness, is expressed through love, and reaches perfection when there is communion-presence between our divine Lover and us, and between those being catechized and the divine Lover. In particular, liturgical catechesis draws all of us into liturgy as a way of life so Gospel induced that, with St. Paul, we can “sound down” that we “have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). We catechize not primarily by sounding down content, but primarily by sounding down a Person: Christ who is risen, and who, through the power of the Holy Spirit, dwells within each of us.

As those charged with liturgical leadership, we are challenged to be thrice holy. Nothing we do will be true if we ourselves are not living sounds of this liturgy we love and serve. Once again, I thank you for the honor of receiving this award and for giving me these graced moments with you. May God be praised for the divine holiness, love, and perfection! May God be thanked for calling us to share in divine holiness, love, and perfection!