

The Future of Liturgical Formation in the Academy: A Knotty Problem

Dear colleagues, I'm grateful to be here with you, celebrating the 50th anniversary of FDLC. The history of the Center for Liturgy at Notre Dame – approaching our own 50th in 2020 – is so closely tied to the work of the Federation. Many here studied at the University of Notre Dame, taking courses with Aidan Kavanagh, Mark Searle, Robert Taft, John Melloh, Michael Driscoll, Nathan Mitchell, Max Johnson, and more.

I've been asked to address the future of liturgical formation in the academy. This kind of address risks falling into an apocalyptic discourse more befitting the end of days (or the final Sundays in Ordinary Time) than a golden anniversary. When I arrived at the Center for Liturgy, I undertook conversations with 20 Catholic colleges or Universities around the United States. I chose institutions where there was someone already on faculty in liturgy/sacraments. Some were R1, top tier research Universities. Others were small liberal arts colleges. The main point of conversation was to assess whether there was interest in hiring professors in liturgical studies in the future, after the retirement of the major figure. Among the 20 institutions contacted, 15 said that they would not be replacing the person in liturgical studies with another person in liturgical studies. There were hires to be made in comparative theology, in social ethics, and constructive theology. Liturgy was not viewed as an essential area of undergraduate education.

Of course, producing professors of liturgical studies is not the *telos* of a liturgical studies area (happily so). Diocesan and parish directors of liturgy are integral to the flourishing of the Church. But I don't need to tell this group that hires in this area are not exactly robust. On the academic side, one must acknowledge that few students are approaching Universities/colleges seeking to study "liturgy." Programs have closed or consolidated throughout the United States including at Saint John's in Collegeville (from MA in LS to MTS) and at Notre Dame (where our

summer MA in liturgy is functionally dead, although our MTS in liturgical studies remains alike).

The closure of these programs was not ultimately a decision of these institutions that liturgy didn't matter. Rather, the reality in the academy is that we have seen a significant change in the type of student who applies for a master's degree. Beginning in the 1950s, Catholic colleges and universities began programs of continuing education and theological formation around the *ressourcement* unfolding in Europe. At Notre Dame, Josef Jungmann, Louis Bouyer, and Johannes Hofinger all spent time on campus teaching religious and clergy (and a few undergraduates wearing Hawaiian shirts). The flourishing of programs in liturgy and religious education made sense in the post-conciliar period as new rites had come into existence. The recipients of these master's degrees tended to be those already possessing a higher degree, often a M.Div. They knew the Bible, they had an introduction to sacramental theology, and they now possessed competency (after attending CUA, Saint John's, or Notre Dame) in liturgical history, theology, and ritual studies.

For the most part, those students no longer exist. The average person pursuing a master's degree in theology, the one who applies to Notre Dame or Boston College or CUA, is not a clergy or religious. He or she (and more often she) is 22 or 23 years old (this summer I taught 23 students, 3 were men). He or she does not possess a master's degree, nor to be honest, anything approaching competency in theology. He or she is likely interested in teaching at a Catholic high school, where there is perceived job security. If he or she has an academic interest, it's likely not related to liturgical studies. Even those interested in liturgical studies proper, find themselves more at the intersection of ethics and systematic theology by the end of their degree.

Of course, this demographic is linked to the few who are pursuing degrees in theology. We run a certificate program in liturgical formation at the Center for Liturgy. At present, we have 150 students in this program. They're mostly moms and dads, retirees and sacristans who want to understand a bit more about the work they're doing. One student was pursuing the certificate so she could teach 2nd grade religious formation in her school. Another wanted to help with baptismal formation. Not a few of these students are without a bachelor's degree at all. Their first language may be Spanish.

It doesn't mean that there is no interest in liturgy. It just means that it's appearing in places that are weird. The Center is regularly approached by Catholic schools, asking what to do about the decline in the number of Catholics attending the school and Mass. We're regularly approached by Newman Centers to discuss how the liturgy is linked to the living of life. It just means that the education is taking place in weird places.

So, things have changed. Yet institutions like our own (and my own) tend to be conservative relative to adjusting to such change. Sears didn't perceive the advent of Walmart and online shopping. Toys R Us didn't imagine that moms and dads would get their Tickle Me Elmo via Amazon Prime. You often don't notice that you're no longer needed, no longer important, until you're closing.

So what to do? Let me suggest a common line of inquiry, of research and formation, that those engaged in the study and practice of the sacred liturgy might consider moving forward.

In the early days of the liturgical movement, there was an assumption that "liturgy" could serve as the medicine against the ails of encroaching modernity. Secularization, individualism, industrialization, and racism—all could be healed through the liturgy. The

Second Vatican Council took this assumption as its own, seeing in the sacred liturgy the key to a *ressourcement*, an *aggiornamento*, a “new” evangelization. Hopes were high.

I suspect that though very well-intentioned members of the early liturgical movement and those affiliated with the reforms were sometimes a tad naïve. They didn’t fully understand what happened in modernity. We canonize John Henry Newman this weekend. In his then Anglican Parochial and Plain sermons, Newman diagnoses the effects of modernity. On the one hand, there is a reticence to see religion as anything more than a peripheral dimension of one’s life. Too much kneeling, too much superstition, too much sanctity is excessive for our age. The gentleman should not give in to such excesses but understand religion as offering the rudiments of a domesticized morality. Religion is a private affair, primarily reserved to the woman.

On the other hand, there is a religiosity that becomes almost entirely inward. It is the religiosity of the evangelical, constantly checking whether his or her experience has facilitated a “genuine” encounter with Christ. The ordinances and practices of the Church are peripheral to this individualized encounter, accessible only through self-contemplation. Sincerity trumps ritual activity.

These two dimensions of modernity have led to a specific kind of secularization. It’s not the disappearance of religion from the public sphere or the loss of the human capacity for transcendence (Apple Store). Rather, it is a forgetfulness, what Danielle Hervieu-Leger calls a “break in the chain of memory.” Since religion is privatized, domesticized, an interior reality, then particularities don’t matter. We don’t pass them on. We don’t have a social structure to sustain religious practice, because religion is not really a social phenomenon at all.

In this sense, liturgical formation in the University can’t just be about figuring out what was done in the early Church (or whatever is your golden age) and then implementing it today.

Nor is it simply repeating phrases from the various documents of the Second Vatican Council. My students are underwhelmed by this, seeing these texts as antique remnants of a past time that has no meaning to them. We must deal more soberly with this today where disaffiliation is on the rise (for a variety of reasons), where sacramental practice is down, where referring to liturgy as the “source and summit” makes no sense to anyone.

A note about why this is important. In his brilliant speech at Kenyon College, the late David Foster Wallace noted that everyone worships something. Whether it’s power, money, sex, or drugs, secularization has not eliminated our capacity to worship. We’re made for it. But we can and do worship the wrong things. And worshipping the wrong things can be deadly. It leads to anxiety among young adults, the kind of anxiety that has led to a suicide epidemic, an opioid epidemic, an epidemic of hate against the migrant because of our desire to worship some version of “nationhood” of “America” that doesn’t exist. It worships consumption, money, power, prestige. It worships an idol of the impossible perfect family. Augustine is right – we are made to worship God and our hearts will be restless until they rest in God, but they’ll also try to find rest elsewhere.

Here, I see the work then as retrieving, re-membling, reconstructing a space where liturgical prayer again makes sense. This means the following dimensions must be considered (and perhaps part of a broader curriculum):

- 1) The historical ways that liturgical prayer has influenced, interacted, transformed, clashed, or has been influenced by society. What worldview is necessary for this kind of prayer?
- 2) A better connection between devotion and liturgy, carefully showing how as a unified human being, we cannot draw too large a distinction between these two.

- 3) The way that personal identity is constructed (re-constructed) through liturgical practice. Why do people choose to pray in the way that they do? Spiritual formation?
- 4) Dispositions needed for divine worship – open/closed households.
- 5) Why does “stuff” matter to Catholicism? How does this stuff form us, often, in a way more than speech? Should liturgy committees and the USCCB office of divine worship spend a bit more time focusing on stuff above texts? How are immigrants to the US involved in shaping/re-shaping a kind of privatized American religiosity around processions and stuff?
- 6) How is the liturgy an “aesthetic” encounter? What kind of spiritual formation is required to engage in an aesthetic encounter today? What role has technology played in making this more difficult for us?

All of this has to be done in ways that may be in addition to the traditional master’s degree.