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Tony Conry

The Mass
in Brazil

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In this article I wish to share with the Irish Church some of my experience of liturgy in Brazil where I have spent almost all my priestly ministry. My roots are in Irish Catholicism in different times and very different circumstances. I was ordained in Maynooth in 1963 for the diocese of Elphin, one of a class of 69, just two weeks after the death of John XXIII. Though it had all the limitations of a pre-conciliar seminary I am deeply indebted to that institution, where I had the privilege of four years with professors Patrick Corish and a young Wilfrid Harrington. Who could ask for better? This little contribution is my way of saying thanks. In 1969 I was parachuted as a volunteer missionary into a very different world where all my certainties were gradually called into question.

In the 50 years since Vatican II, Brazil has been a liturgical laboratory. The Latin American Church was a powerful force all through the Council and none more so than the Brazilian bishops through the charismatic leadership of Archbishop Helder Camara. In 1968 there was a follow-up with the Latin American Episcopal Conference of Medellin where the ideas of the Council were translated into concrete action. The positive leadership of many great Brazilian bishops generated a groundswell of enthusiasm which swept through the country and despite all the setbacks over the years is still giving impetus to the local churches. This is especially evident in the liturgical field. Undoubtedly the more emotional, adaptable and informal character of the Brazilian people makes things a lot easier and change flows more smoothly. Several different initiatives were taken, especially in the area of liturgical music, with training and workshops for everybody, lay and clerical.

‘You know the best Masses are the funeral Masses’. This is how a friend of mine put it on one of my visits to Ireland. It’s something I’ve heard repeated several times before and since. I suggest this could be an enlightening starting point for an analysis of what liturgy should be and often is not and how we can have more meaningful and satisfying celebrations, for both people and priest.

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I have opted to deal exclusively with the Sunday Mass as this is our main concern and because of its influence on almost every other aspect of pastoral activity. Neither is there any point in suggesting that we go back in time to the Apostolic Era. We certainly can get ideas and be inspired but we have moved on and we are where we are for whatever reasons. Just as Christians had to adapt to changing circumstances over the centuries, we are challenged to do the same thing today. Our northern star must always be the message. The rest is always secondary, to be used, changed or simply discarded. Common sense and respect for people's sensibilities must always be taken into consideration. We are all people of habit and habits don't easily change. Old wine always tastes better!

What are the ingredients of the funeral Mass that set it apart as different and attractive? People are there because they want to be there, there is real motivation. There are no time restraints. People are not looking at their watches. The Mass always involves quite a big number of people doing different things. There are normally good readers and the readings are freely and well chosen. I would like to come back to this point later as it is of fundamental importance. The congregation takes part in the singing because they follow a hymn-sheet. The whole celebration is very personal and gives adequate space for the emotional. It is a liturgy where life and faith meet, where the human and the divine merge and where the readings lift us beyond the harshness of daily reality. For most it is an intimate experience of God's love and compassion. The Irish Church because of its traditional extraordinary dedication to the old, the sick, the dying and its undeniable concern for the poor has possibilities that few other countries have.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

Allow me to make a few general observations before getting down to the nitty-gritty of concrete suggestions. I consider liberty as being the number one priority in liturgical expression. Rubrics and norms are guidelines, never to be allowed become strait-jackets. Freedom, however, demands creativity and adaptability. When we are tired, lack motivation or simply lazy it is much easier to opt for routine and as we all know this inevitably leads to a deadening of our sensibilities and lethal dullness all round. The expression 'fall into a routine' is not without significance! It can easily become a bottomless pit where we get no divine light or air and liturgy sinks to a lifeless chore, to be got through as quickly as possible.

Liturgy should be a celebration of life – the lives of ordinary families trying to make the best of situations that are often chaotic. Liturgy is about real people and only has meaning in the understanding of Church as the people of God called by baptism

to be living members of Christ. Everybody present is part of the celebration. Here we might make a distinction between celebration and ritual ceremony. A good ceremony doesn't mean a good celebration. Ceremony has overtones of formality, the theatrical, the show, where props, external trappings and human posturing can blind us to the living presence of God.

In its primary meaning the word liturgy means action. Modern training methods have adopted the system of workshops rather than lectures actively to engage people in the learning process. Our churches are based on the class hall, teacher-student formula. Nobody, especially young people, any longer accepts being talked at or down to. They need action and variety and that is a challenge to our tired old bones. Song, dance and reflective moments need to be taken on board. This doesn't mean turning the Mass into a local version of 'Riverdance' or the 'Sound of Music'.

Liturgical liberty is about taking an honest and objective look at our ceremonial box. It is totally set in a monastic environment, both in content and style. Our normal messed-up parishes are a far cry from the monastic haven where biblical and theological subtleties and nuances are sweetness on the desert air – entirely wasted. Where I have worked in São Paulo all those years most of our parishioners are migrants from the land and a spade is still a spade. When I go back to Roscommon I don't see any great difference, a spade is still a spade in Tulska. A tremendous amount of frustration and resentment has been shown by the way a strange new English translation of the Missal has been foisted on priests and people. To me the problem is far wider and more serious. What criterion is used for the Sunday readings? Who is the liturgical genius/alien who selects the readings? Recently the first reading for the second Sunday of Lent was an obscure story of Abraham offering an animal sacrifice on the mountain top. That might be acceptable reading for a theology class but totally out of place in an important Lenten liturgy. Readings should be chosen to convey a clear message without the necessity of calling in your local Biblical scholar. We have a plethora of readings from Hebrews which might have made sense to that very select caste of newly converted rabbis but is totally incomprehensible to ordinary people today and, let me add, to most priests, including yours truly.

I have always been a strong admirer of the communications creativity of our religious predecessors. In scattered rural communities the church steeple could be seen for miles around, thereby mentally reducing distance. It was the equivalent of our TV screen. The bell in the high tower with its different chimes called people to prayer, to funerals or warned them of impending danger. It was the countryman's radio. The stained-glass windows

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served as catechetical videos. If you have an opportunity, pay a visit to the parish church in Navan, Co. Meath. From the outside it is an ordinary, even ugly, building, built sometime around 1860. The surprise is inside, inspired by the La Scala theatre in Milan. The altar is on the long sidewall, there is a wide upper gallery and the sensation is that everybody is near the altar. It was designed for communication. This is one of our great challenges today. In a predominantly urbanized society suffering from information overload we need to define our message and how we can best spread it. In a pathologically clericalized Church, with all the force of gender discrimination, we seem to be more concerned with the 'who' rather than the 'what' and the 'how'.

The Mass is a community celebration, in theory, but in practice one would be hard put to see this. We need to get out of the box if we are to rescue this community dimension.

CONCRETE SUGGESTIONS

In Ireland we turned the altar around but we didn't turn the sacristy around. The short cut from the sacristy to the altar is the death knell of people participation. If we want to get people involved we must start from where the people are, at the entrance. In most churches the disconnect is inbuilt. The whole sacristy area, normally hidden away at the back, should be brought out to the front of the church and be accessible to people. If necessary improvise.

My first concrete suggestion is to organize the entrance procession of all the people who have an active part in the celebration, ministers, readers, altar servers etc. It doesn't have to be over-organized or choreographed. We don't have that problem here because we wouldn't succeed even if we wanted. Improvisation is the name of the game. We invite all the children doing catechism to be part of the procession and give them something to carry. Invent. Children need to be active, they feel part if they are doing something. This is true of everybody. The procession passes through the assembly and psychologically makes the assembly part of the celebration and connects them to the sanctuary.

A key figure from the very start is the commentator whose role is discreetly to bring all the parts together and direct the assembly throughout. From our experience here the distance between theory and practice is very great and it's the hardest nut to crack. It should be easier in Ireland where there are so many highly qualified people. Because it is hard to get the perfect fit shouldn't mean we don't keep on trying. The alternative is that the priest who is president of the assembly is also commentator, eventually doing everything alone and then we are back to square one.

THE PENITENTIAL RITE

The penitential rite brings us face to face with one of the most intriguing phenomena in the Church today, the almost total fall-off in private confessions. It is an undeniable fact right round the board. How do we explain *sensus fidelium* or *vox populi vox Dei* in this context? People have given up private confession, not confession itself. The penitential rite is a public confession. My own opinion is that we have been gliding over this part of the liturgy for so long that we have lost all sense of its importance. In our parish here we have a community liturgy of reconciliation some time before Christmas and on the morning of Good Friday. It is always well attended and people like it. Personally I like it very much, it has much more meaning. The penitential rite at the beginning of Mass should be given more attention and more space. Most parishes have dropped aspersion, which has a very deep symbolism. We have it at all celebrations about once a month. Like anything else if it is done too often it begins to lose its meaning. I have a fixed time every day when I'm available to people in the church. A limited number of people ask to confess, normally when they have problems and are looking for advice. It is more counselling than confession as such. The penitential rite at the beginning of the celebration merits more space and understanding.

THE WORD

The Liturgy of the Word is so important that it merits special attention. For this reason we always have a solemn entrance of the bible which is carried to a special stand before the altar. This is always accompanied with singing and on special occasions with dancing. This is certainly part of our African heritage. We don't have scheduled readers in our celebrations. This might sound strange. We prefer to invite readers on the spot before Mass so that we have more variety and give more opportunity to newcomers or people who have never been given a chance. Obviously it can be a bit risky but it works. It also means we have to be on our toes. We always have at least four people for the readings and the prayers of the faithful. The psalm is always sung. This is important as it teaches people to rediscover the book of psalms as the great book of prayer of the Church. The thinking behind this is actively to involve as many people as possible rather than confining it to a limited chosen few. It's also important to have an equal balance between men and women. This isn't very easy as men everywhere are more timid and very wary of exposing themselves to the public gaze. When possible it is good to have married couples take part together.

I hesitate to even mention the homily, having made all the

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mistakes possible over the years. I certainly don't want to give advice. All I know is that it is the one thing that can switch people off. Most of us are not born orators and don't feel at ease speaking in public. For some it is absolute torture. When I was growing up I still have vivid memories of the Divine Word priests from Donamon coming every year to celebrate Mass when the local priest went on holidays. We always looked forward to the novelty. What I remember most is that they spoke in broken English, gave short sermons and were always very concrete and down to earth. Pope Francis is tirelessly hammering away at the same point. If we had a better selection of readings and better readers the homily would not be that important. Lay people must urgently be taken on board to pass on the richness of their experience, not just when the subject is connected with the family.

To give more meaning to the offertory we need to be more creative, without being gimmicky. It is the moment when the parents could come to the altar and present a new-born baby to the community. What more beautiful offering could be made? Once a month we have a kilo procession when people bring foodstuff and other items and place them at the foot of the altar to be distributed to the poor. Obviously each community will have its own way of doing things and there are no hard and fast rules. The important thing is to make a connection between the ritual offering and the life that is swirling around us day by day, like ever-changing clouds. Routine and tedium are ugly twins. Life around here doesn't give much chance for either. A colleague once described this part of the world as 'the never-a-dull-moment mission'. How right he was!

The kiss of peace is the great parting of the waters between a Brazilian and an Irish liturgy. We must look for common ground, some happy medium between two extremes. I am the first to accept that sometimes we go over the top but if it is an integral part of the liturgy it must be given meaning, and not just in a ritual or symbolic way. It is not an interruption interfering with the solemnity of the moment. People who sit down for a meal together exchange pleasantries. A dry handshake doesn't do much for anybody, that is not what it is all about. I cannot accept that the priest may not leave the sanctuary and circulate amongst the congregation for a few minutes. To deny this is to perpetuate the isolation of the priest figure, to over-emphasize the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist and torpedo the dimension of a community breaking of bread. We have to sit down and tease out the theology behind all this, at a down-to-earth pastoral level and not sit around waiting for directives from people who never worked in a parish with real people and know nothing about the interplay of people in the day-to-day life of a community. When you spot somebody who has

not appeared in the church for some time this is the opportunity to exchange a quick word of welcome.

Communion under both species was sanctioned by the Fathers of the Vatican Council. Why is there such difficulty in putting it into practice both here and in Ireland? We have to find some way forward. It's too important to be left to the whim of any one priest or bishop.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

Good music and singing are of vital importance for good liturgy. I don't mean a good choir, as if it were a gala presentation in the Point. Good singing is when the congregation takes part. In the olden days everybody sang 'Faith of our Fathers' and 'Hail Glorious St. Patrick' with gusto for the simple reason that they knew the words and the melody was conducive to hearty singing. The choir is meant to give the lead, not to monopolize to the exclusion of the congregation. This doesn't mean the choir cannot sing certain parts alone such as the psalms. It's a question of balance. We have been blessed in Brazil with many brilliant composers of liturgical music over many years. Our problem is almost having too wide a choice and having too much singing. People don't sing if they don't like the melody or if they don't know the words. They must have a hymn sheet in their hands. With a musical tradition that has thrown up groups like the Clancys, the Dubliners and a host of others, what is the explanation of people losing their voices in Church? I may be wrong but I will risk an opinion. The songs are too sophisticated, above the heads of the congregation. They are not catchy, they don't attract. In general there is no strength in the message. Why not throw it open to a public competition and see what turns up? The whole question of Ministers of the Eucharist, the Word and above all Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist needs a much deeper study. What is their role? Personally I think the laity deserve better. To dress people up to distribute Communion is just another form of clericalization. Theologically I see it as isolating Communion from the body of the Eucharistic celebration. They should be actively present during the whole celebration. As it is they are merely overgrown altar servers!

Finally, a word of caution. It is more than obvious that these practical suggestions cannot all be put into operation in the same ceremony. The time element must be taken into consideration always. That and common sense. Every parish should have a youth Mass at least once a month at the normal time. It's important that people have a choice and an opportunity of participating in a different type of liturgy. At such a Mass there should be plenty of leeway and the time factor shouldn't be a priority.