

# Classroom Teaching Practices as Embodied, Contextual Liturgical Formation

by Eileen Maggiore

People act on their desires, and their actions, in turn, shape who they will become. This insight into the human condition has been recognized by many great catechists, beginning with Jesus: “Where your treasure is, there also your heart will be” (Mt 6:21). St. Augustine similarly stated, in a famous phrase from his *Confessions* directed to God, “Our hearts are restless, until they rest in You.” Consequently, catechesis, especially classroom-based catechesis, will miss the mark if it aims at informing the mind but forgets to attend to the desires of the heart—desires that are embodied in the formative rituals we engage on a regular basis.

In *Desiring the Kingdom*, the philosopher James K. A. Smith applies the term “liturgy” not just to the embodied, material practices of Christian worship but to a larger category of formative activities that influence our behavior by first drawing our desires toward some ultimate end. Understood in this way, the Christian liturgy “is a ‘hearts and minds’ strategy, a pedagogy that trains us as disciples precisely by putting our bodies through a regimen of repeated practices that get hold of our heart and ‘aim’ our love toward the kingdom of God.”<sup>1</sup> There is competition for the desire of human hearts, however, that is reinforced through what Smith calls cultural or secular liturgies—constellations of formative practices that train our desires toward goals that are *not* God. As they are repeated over time, our personal habits and communal liturgical practices ultimately mold us into a certain type of person, largely without our conscious realization that this is happening. “Our thickest practices—which are not necessarily linked to institutional religion—have a *liturgical* function insofar as they are a certain species of ritual practice that aim to do nothing less than shape our identity by shaping our desire for what we envision as the kingdom—the ideal of human flourishing.”<sup>2</sup> Thus the “liturgies” of consumerism teach us to find our fulfillment in endless consumption, the liturgies of some sporting events encourage us to “worship” sacrificial violence, and the liturgies of social media encourage us to privilege constant but disembodied connection, even to the detriment of building real relationships.<sup>3</sup> The start of a school day is a thick practice that results in a liturgical shaping of students and teachers. The bell rings, students take their places, the Pledge of Allegiance is recited, and school announce-

1 James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, vol. 1 of Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 33.

2 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 87, emphasis his.

3 For a more extended analysis of some secular liturgies, see Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 89-129.

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ments follow. In Catholic or religious schools, prayer intervenes before the pledge, making an implicit claim that love and loyalty to God come before allegiance to one's country. This ritual promotes love for God and American patriotism, in that order, and is designed to promote positive social behavior during the school day and beyond it.

Viewed from this perspective, teaching Christianity is and even *must be* a liturgical practice because rituals of Christian education shape and form both the student and the teacher and offer a process of "counter-formation" to the influence of secular liturgies. I am a teacher with twenty-one years of experience catechizing children, adolescents, young adults, adults, and, currently, 14- to 15- year-olds in a Catholic high school. All these people naturally desire unconditional love and want to belong to a community of like believers. Traditionally, teens rely on family, school, and church communities to promote other-centered awareness and belonging. Although the factors contributing to the increase of non-traditional family structures and the decrease in attendance at Sunday worship are complex, according to Smith's cultural analysis the latter trend especially may also be a sign that peoples' desires have been filled with secular liturgies, leaving little room for the desire for God with which they were created. For example, perhaps on Sunday morning the whole family gathers for a large breakfast and afterwards takes a walk to the playground instead of worshipping at a Sunday morning liturgy. On the surface these family members are fulfilling love of family, self, and environment. However, they are placing the gifts of family and health ahead of worshipping the One who ultimately provided the family and health.

Within the Catholic Church, the New Evangelization calls us to look again at the kind of life the Gospel makes possible, reawakening the spiritual imagination through fuller use of the Church's established signs and symbols. I have introduced several "thick" liturgical practices to my classroom in recent years aimed to draw the hearts of my students toward God and counter the influence of secular liturgies in their lives. Lessons cannot be solely about completing book work or researching where in scripture each sign or symbol originated; there must be time to pray and spiritually experience scripture by engaging signs and symbols in an embodied and potentially formative way. I will describe here my practices of proclaiming the Sunday Gospel and praying the lesson.

### **Proclamation of the Word of God**

A thick liturgical practice that I have introduced to the classroom is a *Monday Morning Gospel Quick Write*. Every Monday morning, the Gospel for the upcoming Sunday reading is explained and proclaimed. After hearing a brief reflection I prepare on what this Gospel reading means for us today, students have the opportunity to apply God's Word to their own lives by writing a short paragraph about how they can enact a message or insight arising from this Gospel passage.

Proclamation of the Gospel is not something I do without preparation and prayer. I pray that God will raise up for me what is most pressing for my listeners so that they might hear God's message in a way that they will best understand. The definition of *Kerygma* in the dictionary is "to proclaim, announce, preach," but that does not describe it adequately. *Kerygma* is a proclamation of the Gospel—but also the soul of the words. It is a dynamism that comes from being a preacher, whether ordained or not, who lives in Christ. It results when the Word of God comes alive through the preacher, as when Paul says, in Galatians 2:20, "It is no longer I who lives but Christ who lives in me." The preacher is the vessel for the Word of God to touch the hearts and lives of the hearers.

The way I teach students about the Kingdom of God is by inculcating the Gospel using dynamic language and imaginative signs and symbols. The Gospel has the power to change lives and form people into disciples. The Word of God is made to uplift all that is good and uncover all that needs to be purified. I am trying to follow the great commission: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15).

After the reflection, the students are given ten to fifteen minutes to write a paragraph based on a set of guidelines that include what they heard, what it means to them, and how they can live it. They are graded on listening and writing about three to five sentences. This activity has helped them process the Gospel message. The benefit for the students, many of whom do not regularly attend Sunday liturgy, is fulfilling a precept of the Catholic Church to hear the Sunday Gospel. Furthermore, students become aware of the Church's Liturgical Year by following along with the Sunday Gospels.

This practice is contextual because in the Gospel reflection I introduce a related scriptural theme or principle for the week that we continue to unpack in the coming days. The goal is to have the students dwell with God's Word and unite with the person of Jesus Christ who is its ultimate source; this classroom activity arouses their desire for God and proposes potential formative practices that could help them direct their hearts toward God. I cannot assess whether they are trying some of their written proposals about how to live the Gospel, but at least they have been given an opportunity to think about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving drink to the thirsty, etc. and begun to imagine themselves as people who act in these ways. Previous years' students have mentioned that they miss hearing the Gospels each week; they don't miss the writing exercise, but they do miss the Word of God. (I have made suggestions for an app they can use on their smartphones.) This feedback suggests that the Gospel Quick Write exercise became a formative practice for at least some of my students.

### **Praying the Lesson**

Another "liturgical" pedagogy I use is concluding each unit lesson with a prayer experience that will engage the imagination through signs and symbols, drawing on embodied techniques of centering prayer and guided meditation. Fred P. Edie recommends awakening liturgical practices to guide formation with some of the Church's central ritual symbols.<sup>4</sup> In the classroom, I find that students' imaginations are stimulated with liturgical symbols that are used in worship.

After the lesson on Moses and the Israelite people, for example, the prayer experience features contemplation on Moses, applying water as the focal imagery. We spent time talking about water before we began the meditation. What is it used for? Students understood water to bring both life and death. As Moses and the Israelites crossed through the waters of the Red Sea, they died to their old way as slaves and received a new life as free people. Since the unit lesson included Moses receiving the Law, the last part of the prayer was an examination of conscience based on the Ten Commandments.

We began with Big Daddy Weave's "I Am Overwhelmed by You" on video. The lights were off, a candle was lit, and a large bowl of water was set in a prayer space. The first scripture was read: Moses is called by God (Ex 3:9-12). Silence filled the room, then a slow chant was played on the computer ("God Has Chosen You") for three minutes as the students rested comfortably. The second passage was read: Ex 14:29-15:19, the Song of Moses after the Israelites' triumphant crossing through the sea. Soft sounds of water running accompanied three minutes of quiet reflection. An examination of conscience for teens was slowly read for each Law with additional silence followed by an act of contrition.

The students seemed to enjoy the new ways to pray and reinforce the lesson while correlating it to their worship experience. Edie calls this "imaginative paradoxical juxtaposition for truth."<sup>5</sup> The students remembered events of their life (in their subconscious), drew upon those in their imagination, and compared them to the symbols in

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<sup>4</sup> Fred P. Edie, "Liturgy and Faith Formation: Reimagining a Partnership for the Sake of Youth," *Liturgy*, 29.2 (2014), 34-44. See <https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063X.2014.846739>.

<sup>5</sup> Edie, "Liturgy and Faith Formation," 41.

worship. As they heard the stories, they tried to make sense of them in light of their life experiences and thereby added personal value to the stories.

Teaching in the classroom can be “liturgical” because our practices shape who we become. Of all classroom subjects, Religion ought to direct the desire of students’ hearts and promote positive social behaviors. I have been doing these Gospel Quick Writes and lesson-based prayer experiences for high school students for several years. It is my well-founded hope that they will continue the practice of listening to the Gospel *of* the Sunday liturgy and perhaps do so more often *in* the Sunday liturgy. I likewise hope that the liturgical symbols they engage in the classroom might have an ongoing formative influence on their lives. It is a blessing for me as I meditate on the readings to contextualize the Gospel for them. I have grown in my understanding of my students and the Gospel each year. Clearly these teaching practices are also shaping me, leading me to a fuller understanding of Jesus and a stronger desire to worship and serve Him. This mode of classroom catechesis is bearing fruit for the students and the teacher as we all learn from Christ, our Good Teacher, our Savior and our God.