Since the promulgation of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM), I have attended Mass in many parishes in various dioceses. In all places it was obvious that the GIRM had been implemented. Yet in no two churches did I find “identical” liturgies. Despite differing adaptations there was a basic unity among my experiences enabling worshippers to enter meaningfully into the ritual. For those desiring strict uniformity in liturgy, this observation could cause concern that liturgical law is not being properly implemented. For others it could signify the exact opposite, namely, that indeed the community has received and interpreted the law.

Church law, liturgical or otherwise, is enacted for the common good. Its purpose is not to restrict or to confine; its aim is to bring a certain freedom to those for whom it is intended. Liturgical law allows one to celebrate with a certain ease of movement. It strives to create an environment conducive for worship, balancing the various needs within the community and establishing a pattern that is essential for ritual. From a theological stance liturgical law assists the assembly in experiencing and celebrating the mystery of God’s presence. It is imposed not for a rigid uniformity but for a ritual unity that enhances the worship of the assembly.

Most Catholics, indeed, most priests or lay ministers do not think of themselves as interpreters of law. Yet each person plays a role in the hierarchy of interpretation. Canon law recognizes that only the legislator authentically (authoritatively) interprets the law, but it acknowledges that interpretations occur in other contexts. Though not strictly charged with the task of interpretation, ecclesiastical judges and administrators construe the meaning of the law in fulfilling their ministries. Doctors of the law, experts with extensive knowledge and experience, render opinions that provide insight, and those bound by the law give it meaning by accepting it and living it out.

Dioceses frequently offer workshops on newly promulgated laws or alert parishes to liturgical emendations. However, pastors and other ministers play a major role in integrating law into the life of the community. Existentially they assist parishioners in embracing the law and giving it life. It is important then that parochial leaders are familiar with the law and knowledgeable regarding basic principles of interpretation. Laws are not meant to be blindly obeyed but to be understood so as to guide

Patricia Smith, O.S.F., is associate visiting professor of canon law at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. She is also an adjunct professor at Neumann College, in Aston, Pennsylvania, and she does canonical consulting.
the people of God and enable them to achieve their ultimate goal, salvation.

How does one go about interpreting laws generated by the revised GIRM and other liturgical documents of a juridic nature? Before suggesting rules of interpretation, it is necessary to state the obvious: one must first read the law. Often ministerial leaders in their busyness wait for a synopsis of the law or seek another’s insight without their own initial analysis. After examining the law, commentaries, workshops, and discussions can assist in clarifying one’s assessment and understanding. Being familiar with the law, parish leaders can employ canonical-hermeneutical principles to assist in its application. The following rules, although not exhaustive, provide a foundation for pastorally interpreting liturgical law; one should: (1) identify the nature of the law; (2) seek the value of the law; and (3) use the law for the good of the community.

**Identify the nature of the law**

First, one must determine that a particular document is indeed law. Universal laws (for the whole Latin Church) are generally issued by the pope, although he may delegate legislative power to a dicastery. The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (CDWDS) has competence concerning the regulation and promotion of the liturgy, and it chiefly exercises legislative power when it promulgates a revised liturgical rite. However, the pope, bishops, and dicasteries issue other types of documents as well. Thus one must determine the nature of the document and how it is disseminated. Often the CDWDS issues juridic documents that are directives or instructions, but not laws themselves. While these norms oblige, they do not have the same weight as law. A recent example is the instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum (RS)* that contains norms regarding the Eucharist. This document is one of executive power rather than legislative authority. It was issued by the CDWDS to clarify the understanding of present laws concerning Eucharist. *RS* does not have the same weight as the GIRM, yet its norms, unless contrary to already existing universal or particular laws, are to be observed.

Having identified the text as legislative, it is important to distinguish the literary forms the law embodies. Norms within a document vary in weight; they may appear as precepts, exhortations, recommendations, or options. Precepts are the strongest norms. They are usually commands or assertions in the present indicative, positively or negatively stated. For example, GIRM #305 states “...During Lent it is forbidden for the altar to be decorated with flowers”; #147 notes that “...The Eucharistic prayer demands, by its very nature, that only the priest say it in virtue of his ordination...”; and #160 stipulates “The faithful are not permitted to take the consecrated bread or the sacred chalice by themselves, and still less, to hand them from one to another. ...”

Some norms appear as exhortations. Referring to the building of the church and its furnishings GIRM, #325 urges that “...a noble simplicity should be ensured. ...” Exhortations express values without explicitly stating how they are to be realized. There is elasticity in interpreting these norms. Recommendations put forth a desired standard without requiring adherence to that ideal. GIRM, #19 states that “It is...recommended that the priest celebrate the Eucharistic Sacrifice even daily, if possible.” The norm proposes the best hope, challenging but not obligating the priest. Options are frequent in liturgical law. Some are expressed as permissions, e.g., GIRM, #149: “It is permitted to mention Coadjutor and Auxiliary Bishops in the Eucharistic Prayer. ...” Options also allow for preferences. GIRM, #332 referring to sacred vessels states: “...the artist may fashion them in a man-
ner that is more in keeping with the customs of the region. . . . " Each literary form embodies law, yet needs to be considered individually in order to identify its juridic weight.

Laws must also be considered in their context. The Roman Missal, dating back to the Council of Trent, has evolved over the centuries, shaped by history, culture, and custom. The present GIRM is prefaced to the third revision of the Roman Missal since the Second Vatican Council. It must be interpreted in light of Vatican II, particularly the Constitution on the Liturgy, and other principles and standards for good celebration contained in post-conciliar documents.

Seek the value of the law

The key hermeneutical factor in interpretation is to seek the value underlying the law. This necessitates approaching the law from the legislator’s perspective. Values that the law embodies are not personal, but communal standards intended for the universal or particular church. At times values are easily discernible in the norms of law. For example, the GIRM emphasizes times for silence to be observed during Mass. It obviously highlights the need for reflection on the awesome mystery being celebrated in order to internalize the experience. Sometimes a bit more effort is needed to discern the value that the legislator is endorsing. For example, GIRM, #162 states: “Ministers [of holy communion] should not approach the altar before the priest has received Communion . . . .” Perhaps this law serves to highlight the fraction rite that could be lost to the assembly with special ministers gathering around the altar at that time.

In seeking the values underlying law, one should assume that the legislator intends what is best for the community; thus the law should be interpreted from a positive perspective. While some norms may appear irrelevant, it is important to consider the entire law from the vantage point of the larger church, and from this perspective to determine how it is best applied to the particular community.

Use the law for the good of the community

Parish ministers should remember that law is a means to an end, not the end itself. Law is superceded by love. It is given for the benefit of the community and is to be used for the advantage of those for whom it is intended. A canonical maxim notes that the burdensome should be restricted and the favorable extended (Regulae iuris, 15). Accordingly, favorable laws (most liturgical laws) should be interpreted as broadly as possible according to their words and context. Only laws dealing with penalties, the restriction of rights or containing exceptions are subject to strict interpretation (c. 18).

Laws exist in a cultural context and should be interpreted to apply to the concrete situation of the heritage and social conditions of particular communities. Pastoral ministers need to be in touch with the culture of the law as well as the culture of the community they serve. The spirit of equity, that is, justice balanced by mercy and kindness, demands that the law be applied not rigidly but always with the good of the people of God in mind.

Conclusion

These three basic rules of interpretation—identifying the nature of the law, seeking its value, and using it for the good of the community—can assist parish leaders to assimilate laws into meaningful worship that fits the community. Good interpretation allows liturgical laws to provide the structure needed for good ritual, while not being the primary focus of the assembly.