To Be What We Celebrate
Engaging the Practice of Liturgical Catechesis

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What are the distinguishing characteristics of liturgical catechesis? A noted voice in the field develops solid principles and an integrated process to help parish catechetical and liturgical ministers to envision the task.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) published in 1997 begins by giving an overview of the vitality of catechesis today but then lists some of the problems. One issue is that although catechesis is intrinsically bound to every liturgical and sacramental action, it frequently has only a weak and fragmentary link with the liturgy. Limited attention is given to liturgical symbols and rites; scant use is made of the liturgical sources; catechetical courses have little or no connection with the liturgical year; and liturgical catechesis is marginalized in catechetical programs (GDC, 30).

The reader may agree or disagree with this critique, but it raises the issue of what is liturgical catechesis. The task in this essay is to explore the meaning of liturgical catechesis, the foundational principles, and the role of the ritual text and celebration in catechesis. Let me begin by defining what I mean by liturgical catechesis. It is an integrated process, rooted in biblical and liturgical signs, rites, and symbols in the context of the community. The purpose of liturgical catechesis is to lead communities and individual members of the faithful to maturity of faith through full and active participation in the liturgy which effects and expresses that faith in conscious living out of a life of justice. Liturgical catechesis

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aims to uncover the meaning of the words and actions so that believers may gradually realize that, when they participate in the sacramental actions, they are actually participating in the saving action of Christ that the sacrament signifies.

The “content” of liturgical catechesis comes out of the theological understanding of the sacraments as found in the ritual texts, symbols and symbolic actions, scriptures, and historical background that uncovers and discloses the significance of the liturgy. The “method” of catechesis is participation in word and symbol. It is the act of celebrating that shapes attitudes and outlooks, and transforms actions. The task of liturgical catechesis is to attend to the images found within the liturgy. There are three underlying principles, namely, liturgy is formative; liturgy is first and foremost ritual prayer; and, liturgy is constitutive of Christian identity.

**Underlying Principles**

*Liturgy Is Formative*

There is a certain sense in which we suffer from our past. In the past we were catechized as to the meaning of the sacraments without reference to the actual celebration of the rites. So, too, many catechists today take their cue for teaching the sacraments from any place other than the ritual itself. Many of us believe that the language of liturgy is verbal and conceptual. To look at and explore the meaning of the images and actions never seems as important as the concepts that we teach. Perhaps the most basic problem here is that we simply do not believe that the ritual itself has the power to shape and to transform. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (SC) states that because the sacraments are first signs, they also teach (see no. 59). Liturgy conveys its meaning not through explanation but through participation in the very action of liturgy.

Just as the roots of the word convey, liturgy is primarily action (*ergon*) not thought (*logos*). The words and symbols enact that which is spoken. In the context of the liturgy, when “we give thanks,” when “we ask for pardon,” when “we praise,” these words not only describe attitudes of awe, gratitude, and contrition but effect these attitudes. By participating in the liturgical word and action, individuals come to discover or perceive the relationship being celebrated. Even if the child of catechetical age or the catechumen may not yet be able to articulate meaning, participation provides an intuitive way of knowing that is foundational for future reflection and integration.

Second, liturgy is formative because it creates a common identity. Liturgical language uses plural forms, “we” and “us,” and makes an assembly out of a previously disparate group of participants. It is in and through the repeated pronouncement of these words and the shared experience that the community is constituted (see Connerton).
Liturgy Is Ritual Prayer

There are two key characteristics of ritual that help us to understand liturgy’s formative potential: repetition and symbol. Just as the words are repeated week after week, so too the patterns of our liturgy—gathering, remembering, interceding, thanking, receiving, sending—are repeated. Liturgical ritual forms through repetition. “Repetition is never simply what it proclaims itself to be—never merely ‘the same’ again. The reiteration of ‘the same’ is always a new act in a new time; newness disguises itself beneath sameness” (Buckland, 54). The celebration of the same events year after year, the proclamation of the same sacred texts, and the performance of the same ritual gestures enable the participants to come to remember and celebrate the saving presence of God in past events as an action that is made present and lived now and into the future.

The basic building block of ritual is symbol. Human beings speak a language; so too the liturgy “speaks” a language, the language of symbols and symbolic actions. That language is rooted in a sacramental imagination. Years ago, the late liturgical scholar Mark Searle said that the problems “faced by religion in our culture and by liturgy in our churches springs largely from habits of literalism which have wasted our powers of imagination” (Searle, 103). Liturgy is full of symbols that engage our imagination on the following levels:

Verbal: the scriptures, ritual prayers, our hymns and music. We listen to talk of vine and branches, shepherd, mighty fortress, living water, lamb of God, cup of blessings, holy ground, sweet anointing, clean hearts, mighty wind.

Visual: forms of art that express the same Gospel message that scripture communicates by words (CCC, 1160). The images of Christ in stone, mosaic, paint, or stained glass appeal to the heart and tell us something about God. Perhaps the more important visual symbol is the liturgical assembly itself, the very presence of the participants who are gathered and who have their different functions and roles.

Spatial: the arrangement of baptistry, ambo, altar, chairs for the presider and assembly, reconciliation room, space for the reservation of the Eucharist. These all speak of an understanding of church, of hospitality, and of experience of mystery.

Embodied: our postures and gestures of processions and proclamations; sign of the cross; hands raised in blessing, lifted in prayer, offered in gestures of comfort, extended in reconciliation and forgiveness; the smells and tastes that are integral to the rite and tend to linger in the memory.

Temporal: Liturgical time is related to the rhythms of nature, to the daily rising and setting of the sun, to the beginning and ending of the week, to the changing of seasons and to the rhythm of dying and rising. The week is marked by Sunday; the day by morning and evening prayer; the year by feasts and seasons; a lifetime.
by sacraments. Liturgical time gives coherence or meaning to the life of a Christian.

This multivalent liturgical language of symbol can only be understood if there is renewal of the Christian imagination. To speak of liturgy and imagination can be difficult because it may appear to detract from the seriousness of liturgy (Searle, 126). Imagination can be “imaging,” “imagining that,” or “imagining how” (Casey, 41–46). “To image” is to imagine in a sensory way, as we feel the water touch our bodies in the sprinkling rite and we reflect on the experience of a gentle spring rain. When one “imagines that,” one is imagining all the possibilities within the fabric of relationships. As we hear “Happy are those who are called to his supper” as we are invited to communion, we perceive that our eating and drinking together reflects the meals of Jesus and anticipates the eternal banquet of heaven. In imagining that, we can see the implications and we can make decisions: what does my eating and drinking commit me to? Where does it lead me? When one “imagines how,” one can see oneself in a new situation. When we sing the Holy, Holy of the Eucharistic Prayer, we are “joining our voices with the choirs of heaven.” In “Imagining how” one is participating in a whole new way. Not only do our voices resound here on earth but our voices, both timid and strong, are echoing in heaven. We tend to think of something imagined as fake or false, made up or an illusion. On the contrary, imagination shapes the whole process of making meaning out of life.

**Liturgy Constitutes Christian Identity**

Liturgy is dependent upon these three aspects of imagination. Ritual takes something familiar (actions like greeting or giving thanks, objects like bread or oil or touch, words like kingdom or sacrifice or gift) and in the light of the scripture or tradition triggers the imagination to give it a new twist that shifts human consciousness in a new direction. Ritual invites those who enter into the activity to see from a new perspective, to see new possibilities. It calls them to undergo conversion and transformation.

Because it calls to conversion and transformation, liturgy is constitutive of our Christian identity. The liturgical symbols and symbolic actions are signs of relationship that connect us to persons and events that form our identity. These symbolic actions of the liturgy and the lives of the people who celebrate make a catholic sacramental worldview visible and credible. In the symbolic actions of the liturgy we keep alive the memory of Jesus and continue his mission. Key to all our decisions, actions, and relationships is the continuity provided by memory. Individuals are incorporated into the community of faith that is constituted by the remembrance of common meaning. There is a collective memory that is passed on and carried into the future. As we develop and change over a lifetime we draw on the past and integrate it into the present through the combined
activities of memory and imagination. Through images given to us from our own experience of liturgy or taken from that of others, we are able to think about the past, speculate about possibilities in the here and now, and see implications for the future. In other words, we cannot do without imagination, and therefore we must learn to develop it through reflection and to help others through a process of liturgical catechesis.

**Process of Liturgical Catechesis**

So how do we go about the process of opening up the symbols and images of liturgy, deepening people’s imagination, and leading them to transformation? The *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC 1997), like the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), presents the “paschal catechesis” of the Lord—the Risen Christ’s encounter with the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35)—as a model of liturgical catechesis. This scriptural passage illustrates in particular principles that underlie liturgical catechesis. Luke’s narrative begins by noting that the eyes of the disciples were prevented from recognizing Jesus. Jesus uses the Hebrew Scriptures to give insight into the mystery of Christ (“then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures” [v. 27]). In the ritual action of giving thanks and breaking bread Christ makes himself known to them (“their eyes were opened and they recognized him” [v. 31]). Their recognition evoked a response of conversion (“were not our hearts burning within us? . . . and they . . . returned to Jerusalem” [v. 32–33]). It leads to their witness (“they told what happened” [v. 35]).

The phrases “their eyes were closed” and “their eyes were opened” are key to understanding the passage and to understanding liturgical catechesis. Insight into the sacraments will depend upon a sacramental view of the world—“attending to the invisible as if it were visible.” In order to do liturgical catechesis, we must first cultivate a sacramental worldview. In and through the most ordinary and common experiences and things of our lives, we have the potential to encounter God in Jesus Christ through the Spirit. Karl Rahner spoke of the profoundly graced experience of our daily experiences: in both the ups and downs we can discern the very presence of God in our lives. So too, the very simple things of water, oil, bread, wine, and touch can become an epiphany—a manifestation—of the Triune God drawing us into divine life.

**What are the characteristics of liturgical catechesis?**

Liturgical catechesis has certain identifying qualities or characteristics. These are: paschal, ecclesial, sacramental, and transformative (Collins, 594–95). To speak of liturgical catechesis as *paschal* means that at its heart is the person of Jesus who died, was raised from the dead, and remains with us always (CCC,
426). Christ is present in the assembly gathered, in the scripture proclaimed, and in the sacramental action (SC, 14). By remembering his dying and rising in our sacramental celebrations, we express and deepen our relationship with God in Christ through the Spirit.

Because liturgy is ecclesial, so is liturgical catechesis. Liturgy is a celebration belonging to the whole church. When the assembly gathers it is a visible sign of the community’s identity and belonging. The baptized have a right and an obligation to participate in this public worship, which goes beyond individual meaning to the larger context of what God has done in Christ for God’s people.

As sacramental, the purpose of liturgical catechesis is “to initiate people into the mystery of Christ . . . by proceeding from the visible to the invisible” (CCC, 1075). Integral to the liturgy are central symbols like the assembly itself, water, wine, oil, bread, the laying-on-of-hands, the reading of scripture, and the sign of the cross. Liturgical catechesis aims to uncover the meaning of these symbolic actions so that all people—from youngster to elder—may gradually and ever more fully realize that through the force of the Spirit the memory and meaning of Christ’s saving work are manifest in these earthly realities.

The primary goal of liturgical catechesis is to encourage and enable transformation, not teach people how to act or behave at liturgy. Conversion is an ongoing, lifetime process. Each of the sacramental rituals calls us to become that which we celebrate. In the liturgy we are empowered by God to strive to bring about the reign of God.

**Phases of Liturgical Catechesis**

Catechesis for, through, and from the liturgy, and for the sake of justice are four interdependent aspects of the same process patterned after the integrated process of the catechumenate of the early church. The aspects are not linear but cyclical. The reflections always lead back to the starting point, which is the celebration. Catechesis for the liturgy prepares for the celebration. The first step is to know the assembly that is celebrating, to study the prayers and readings of the rite in the context of the feasts and season of the liturgical year. The principles for catechesis are found in the theology of the rite, contained in the introduction to the Rite. The scriptures and prayers provide the images for reflection. For the catechumens and others as well, the image of journey is a powerful image to trace through the scriptures and prayers of the rite. The process of catechesis moves from the reflection on the rite to personal experience (which values the cultural background of the group), to the communal or societal, to the scriptures, faith statements, or texts of the prayers, and finally back to the rite. An essential question is, “What does this ask of us?” The purpose of the preparation is not to explain the rite or sacrament about to be celebrated but to build up a lexicon of words, images, and concepts that enable people to enter into the mystery of Christ present among us.
The second phase is *catechesis through the liturgy*. Liturgy conveys its meaning not through explanation but through participation. Liturgy is experiential and liturgical catechesis opens up and develops an intuitive way of knowing. Even though people may not always be able to articulate the meaning, participation is the foundation for future reflection and meaning. Liturgical ritual nurtures and shapes attitudes, values, and actions. The languages of the liturgy will speak richly and ambiguously. The vocabulary is color, food and drink, movement, touch and smell, life and death, sound and repetition. Liturgy does not teach in any didactic way but, like all ritual, patterns and forms its participants through repetition and multiple meaning. Out of the experience comes insight.

The third phase, *catechesis from the liturgy*—often named *mystagogy*—occurs after the celebration and is a systematic reflection on the liturgical experience of God’s presence and action that finds expression in the living out of the Christian life. It takes place in the midst of the community and brings together the human values, the received tradition, and the experience of the individual within the context of the community. The liturgical symbol and action speaks for itself. Catechesis opens up these symbols so that they may reveal the God present in the lives of the members.

The very first task of catechists is to enable people to discover the invisible in the visible by attending to the symbols. For example, when parents are gathered in preparation for the baptism of their newborn, or when newly baptized adults come together in the Easter Season after their initiation, or when a group of adults are gathered to deepen their sense of baptismal identity, the catechist can take the prayer of blessing over the water that takes place before baptism. In this blessing, the church gathered calls to mind the events in salvation history in which water effected new life and prefigured the mystery of baptism. The opening of the prayer of blessing reminds us that what we see can lead us to that which we do not see: “Father you give us grace through sacramental signs which tell us of the wonders of your unseen power” (RCIA, 222). What is unseen is the relationship of grace.

All of the verbal symbols that follow in the prayer (waters of the great flood, waters of the Red Sea, the waters of the Jordan, the water and blood from the side of Christ) serve to give further insight into the mystery of salvation by engaging the assembly in a dynamic process that leads from death to life. The

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blessing of the baptismal water shows the saving action of God through time and God’s action now in the life of those being baptized. The prayer offers a host of images that not only point to saving history but also to the experience of birth and death, slavery and freedom, being washed clean, coming to identity in the life of believers. Reflection on the prayer becomes a means of interpretation of one’s personal experiences—the gift of conception, pregnancy, and birth; the journey of conversion and discipleship; the ongoing challenge of living life in the midst of death, liberation in the midst of bondage—in the light of faith because it weaves together the biblical text, the paschal mystery, and the life circumstances of the believing community. So too the experience of touching water, being bathed in water, swimming in water can be connected to the ritual experience of being immersed in water. The purpose of this reflection on liturgical words and actions is not only to be able to enter more fully into the rites of initiation but to understand the saving action of God in the day-to-day lives of the believing community.

Catechesis for mission is the final phase. In a certain sense to name catechesis for mission as a specific aspect of liturgical catechesis is redundant. Every aspect of the process includes the question of what change is demanded in the assembly’s outlook and actions. The separate category is simply an attempt to emphasize that the purpose of the liturgy is to give thanks and praise to God by the concern for the dignity of all people and by working for reconciliation and peace. Liturgy gives insight into action. In the course of action for social justice, we return to the liturgy because in the proclamation of the word, in the declaration of God’s forgiveness, in the sharing of the Eucharistic bread and cup, we find the foundations of justice and peacemaking. In any work for justice, we need community and, in the liturgical assembly, we find a community of like mind, a community that proposes a vision of the reign of God.

To do liturgical catechesis is to multiply the associations evoked by the ritual and prayer to show how the images and symbols offer insight into the invisible: an awareness of God’s loving presence in my life, perhaps a fleeting glimpse of myself and the homeless woman on the streets as one Body, one Spirit in Christ. This liturgical approach to catechesis is not new but rather is a restoration of a relationship between liturgy and catechesis that existed in the early church. Catechesis happened in the Church, gathered at the altar and ambo, where the preacher helped people who had heard the word and experienced the ritual actions to enter more deeply into what they had experienced and led them to be incorporated into the community and to live as persons configured to Christ.
References


